

Knightmare

The Sorcerer's Isle

**DAVE
MORRIS**

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THE SORCERER'S ISLE

CHAPTER ONE

The city of Acre, AD 1216

'You say that *this* is the dwelling of the one we seek?'

The young woman turned. Her face was a lamp of ethereal beauty in the pale moonlight reaching down past the rooftops to the narrow cobbled street. Her eyes shone with child-like wonderment, her lips still parted in the question she had just asked. Standing there in her long gown, silken and raven-black like her hair, she might almost have been taken for a creature of elfland.

The guide nodded hastily and gave her a grimy, snaggle-toothed grin. 'Aye, milady - the man they call the Lord of Dreams, you say? Aye, this is where he lives.'

She looked towards the darkened doorway ahead. Her tongue flickered out and moistened her lips - an indication of uncertainty. Wavering, she turned to the burly warrior at her shoulder and spoke to him in a strange, lilting language.

The warrior stared down at their slyly smiling guide. His bristling beard and long wiry hair made his frown seem all the more fierce, and the guide could not help shrinking back half a step towards the shadows. Armour fittings jangled as the warrior put a strong, threatening grip on the front of the guide's

tunic. His words made no sense to the man, but their meaning was clear in the snarling tone: the reward for betrayal is death.

Grimacing, the guide plucked feebly at the warrior's fist and attempted a laugh. Nervousness turned it into something more like a whimper. 'Please, lady; please . . .' he whined. 'Tell your man I am your honest servant. I would no more lie than I would steal Communion wine from the altar of a church.'

The woman looked at the guide, weighing his obvious untrustworthiness against his fear. After a moment, she came to a decision. She gently pushed the warrior's hand back. With a gasp of relief, the guide shrank away and scurried over to the door. He pushed it open, revealing the flicker of oil lamps within, and turned with a gap-toothed smile.

The woman swept up her skirts and stepped inside. The warrior, left hand on the hilt of his sword, scowled as he followed her.

The stench out in the open air had been bad enough. In here, gritty oil-smoke stung the eyes and vied with the stench of sweat and stale urine. Guttering lamplight sketched a floor of packed earth covered with dirty straw. The clay-brick walls were defaced with stains and scratched obscenities. Among the shadows were scurrying shapes where rats moved in the deepest corners of the room, gnawing on the few scraps of gristle they could find.

Rats of a very different sort sat around the bare wooden table that was almost the only item of furniture. Eight men - and a more villainous-looking company it would be hard to imagine, with their scars and eyepatches and sneering grins. They were mostly Venetian, to judge by the accents, though one

had the darker cast of a Saracen. Slowly, as the warm breath of night air wafted into the room to make the oil-lamps dance, they looked up from their game of knucklebones.

'Ah, a pretty maid comes a-callin'!' said one, a gangling whippet of a man who was missing his right ear. 'An' surely she's a houri right out've your Paradise, Ahmed?'

The Saracen glanced up and scrutinized the woman with narrowed eyes. 'She would tempt the muezzin from his tower,' he conceded. 'What brings you here, woman?'

The woman looked back at them, her only reply the same faint fey smile. Though not understanding what was said, the warrior did not fail to notice that each man had a weapon beside his stool. And each caressed that weapon now, unconsciously, as they studied their visitors.

The little guide darted forward and spoke to a burly sour-faced man who seemed to be the leader. 'They're looking for Shiek Khab, Vittorio,' he said. 'You know: the Lord of Dreams . . .'

Vittorio wiped a dribble of wine out of his beard. 'What of it—?' he started to snap. Then he noticed the guide's significant glance towards the back of the room, where rough wooden stairs led up to the next floor. Instantly his manner changed; yellow teeth bared in a smile, he rose and bowed to the woman. 'Milady -of course! We are that lord's humble retainers.'

She was looking around the room dubiously, lip curled in a mixture of amusement and distaste. 'I rather doubt that. A mistake has been made. Return to your gambling game and we shall trouble you no further.'

Vittorio started to come forward, and the others also rose and spread out to encircle the newcomers. Deep in his throat, the warrior gave a low growl and hissed: '*Punica fides!*'

A bow-legged man with a protruding jaw leaned closer, made brave by the weight of numbers. 'What did 'e say?' he chortled.

The woman folded her pale hands in front of her, the very picture of composure. 'My friend thinks you are a perfidious gang of knaves,' she said. 'I am inclined to concur with this opinion. Since our business is urgent, we will not linger here. After retrieving the money we gave to your associate—' she indicated the little guide—'we'll be on our way.'

'Surely you'll want to see the Lord of Dreams first,' said Vittorio, fairly rocking with inner mirth. 'He's waitin' right up those stairs for you; I'll take you up meself. . . '

He lunged for her but something - perhaps the wine he had drunk - made him misjudge the distance. The woman glided back away from him, towards the door now banging softly in the night breeze. The warrior, her guardian, strode forward and planted himself in the midst of the ruffians. Still he had not drawn his sword.

Eight blades left their scabbards simultaneously. Vittorio's was poised barely an arm's length from the warrior's throat. The others moved to surround him. 'Better tell your boyfriend to give it up, wench, or he'll get skewered,' the lantern-jawed ruffian said through gritted teeth.

The woman gave no reply to this. Turning to the door, she began to leave, remarking in Latin to the warrior: 'Join me outside when it is over.'

As she left, Vittorio gaped in astonishment for a few seconds. The wench had his admiration: she was perfectly happy to make her getaway while leaving her bodyguard to his death. This was an attitude worthy of Vittorio himself. Perhaps he would keep the woman for his own - after divesting her of her gold. But first, of course, this stupid lone hero had to die ...

At Vittorio's cry, the tense scene exploded into sudden action. The Saracen, Ahmed, was off to the warrior's right. He jumped forward, raising his scimitar in case it was needed, and seized the man's sword-arm with his left hand so that Vittorio could gut him with a single stroke.

Instead, the warrior drew his sword with his left hand in a reverse grip and stabbed backwards, impaling the lantern-jawed thug who was rushing in behind him. At the same time, he twisted his wrist effortlessly out of Ahmed's grip and, turning the tables, grabbed the Saracen's sword-arm, swinging him across so that he received the blow Vittorio had intended for the warrior.

As the scimitar fell from Ahmed's fingers, the warrior snatched it out of the air and flung it to transfix a third man who was fumbling for a crossbow. Then, transferring his sword smoothly to his right hand, he swung it over his head in a high steel-blue arc to decapitate a fourth man who was coming in from the side.

Vittorio himself fell back stunned, his sword still slick with Ahmed's blood. With a strangled cry he ordered two more of his men to attack together, but both were eviscerated by the grim warrior's unstoppable blade as he brought it across in front of him

with a two-handed scything motion. Seeing the warrior in a low and apparently unguarded stance, Vittorio's one-eared lieutenant darted forward with a scream of forced bravado, his falchion poised above his head for a lethal stroke. But the sword came up with dazzling speed, severed his hands at the wrist, and a moment later speared him with a downward-driving thrust.

Vittorio's sword-tip tapped the earthen floor, stark fear making him almost too weak to lift it. The only sound in the room was the frenzied squeaking of startled rats and Vittorio's high, almost shrill, pants of breath. A wine-pot fell to the floor with a crash as the guide tried to find some cranny through which to flee. The warrior faced Vittorio with a strong merciless grin and sheathed his sword. Then he spread his hands. He was taunting Vittorio - inviting him, *daring him*, to strike.

It was too much for Vittorio to bear. He had watched seven of his men butchered in as many seconds; seven men who had been as hard and callous as any in all Acre. Any one of them had a dozen murders to his name. Now all had been slain by one lone swordsman, who held Vittorio in such contempt that he did not even bother to wield a weapon against him.

With a sob, Vittorio lunged - but it was a dispirited lunge. In his heart, Vittorio knew he was already a dead man. The sword gashed the stranger's cheek, but he only licked the blood with a terrible grin as he took hold of Vittorio's wrist and pulled him close in a deathly embrace. Now even the rats were silent - or all fled - as Vittorio's ragged breath rasped in the dirty air. The warrior held him tighter

and tighter, crushing him with arms like bars of steel against the mail links of his armour. Vittorio gave a last gurgle as blackness swamped around him.

Then there was a horrible crack, followed by silence.

The warrior emerged with the guide who had brought them to this den of thieves. He carried the little man under one arm, like a sack, oblivious of his whimpered pleas.

'Have mercy on me, milady,' whined the guide, tears of fright streaming down his face. The warrior had propped him against the street wall, but had to keep hauling him back off his knees as the man's legs were weak with terror.

'You lied to us,' said the woman, half wistfully. 'We gave you gold, and trusted you. You nearly led us to our deaths.'

'But Vittorio, lady, he's - he *was* - a monster of a man. Sheer villainy incarnate, he was. He made me work for him . . . bring newcomers to the city here so he could rob them. He'd have wrung my neck if I ever disobeyed him.'

The woman stared up past pockmarked stone walls to the crack of starry night just visible between the rooftops. 'Goddess!' she muttered under her breath. 'What is this world we have come to, that is bereft of any rule of law?' To the guide she said: 'Now you have the chance to atone for the hurt you almost did us. Tell me, where in this city will we find the Lord of Dreams?'

Cowering under the warrior's glare, the guide stammered, 'Nuh-not in this part of town. Go northwest out of the harbour district and pass beyond the Genoese Quarter to the seafront. Near the Church of

St Michael there is a street marked with this symbol.' He traced a glyph in the muck of the gutter. 'It's Arabic; it means "Nothing". That's where the man you're looking for lives. Sheik Khab, the Muslims call him; or al-Sahib - "the Master".'

The woman looked at him levelly. 'See how easy it is to co-operate,' she said. 'You were a great help. In the end.'

She turned away, her words hanging in the air like a sentence of death. As the warrior took a menacing step towards him, the guide gave vent to a piteous wail and fell in a huddle. 'O Blessed Virgin,' he prayed, 'don't let him kill me! Please, sweet Jesus . . .'

'Leave him,' the woman said in Latin, pausing to glance back. 'The night's seen enough killing.'

With a grunt of disinterest, as though he were sparing the life of nothing more than a beetle, the warrior turned away and followed her along the deserted street.

Hours later found them under the arch at the end of a narrow street. A symbol was painted across it, a dark curve against the moonlit stone. It was the symbol the guide had told them about. The one that meant 'Nothingness'.

They walked along the street until they came to a door bearing a strange escutcheon: a scarlet shield with an upraised hand in gold. Under this was a bronze knocker, fancifully shaped like a face seen in a nightmare. Here, instead of grime and muck, there were smooth clean flagstones underfoot; and the stench of refuse and excrement that pervaded the rest of the city was hardly noticeable. The moon was now

directly overhead, dropping a cascade of silver light between the close-set houses. A long way off in another street, a dog howled.

'We are here,' said the woman. She touched the bronze knocker, and at her touch the door swung noiselessly inward.

They entered a vestibule that was quite unlike the other building they had visited. Just in front of them, a short flight of marble steps led down to a sunken floor decorated with bright mosaics. Beyond that, carved fretwork panels of cedarwood screened off the hearth so that firelight fell in a pattern of slender dancing beams across the room. There were also two lanterns on high bronze stands, whose thick prisms of amber glass gave the light a warm luxurious cast. Through a pointed arch they could see another room, also lantern-lit, hung with richly coloured tapestries which rippled in a soft and fragrant breeze.

The warrior strode through and pushed one of the tapestries aside. He looked out into a lush moon-washed garden surrounded by a colonnade of slender pillars. As he did, a bulbul in the boughs of a tree nearby broke off its song, startled by the sudden flood of lamplight.

'From the street, you'd hardly think the building big enough to enclose a walled garden,' remarked the warrior.

The woman came up behind him and nodded. 'The stories of the Lord of Dreams are true, then. All of this is sorcery, of course.'

They made their way along a path of paving-stones, passing a pond that gleamed like oil in the moonbeams, and found another chamber on the other side of the colonnade. Stairs led up from here,

alabaster-white with a limning of gold tracery, winding around the walls of a high tower. Candles studded the stairwell, shining down like stars through the gloom.

'Uninvited guests,' said a suave voice suddenly. Til bet you forgot to wipe your feet.'

They glanced up the stairs, startled by the sight of a slim figure who had not been there a moment before. Even in the pastel mix of candlelight and moonshine, it was obvious that he was not quite human. The features were sharp and elfin, with pointed ears and arched eyebrows, and his skin was the colour of autumn sunlight. He wore a mossy green tunic and hose, and his short cape looked to be woven from fresh leaves. At his hip hung a silver knife, its narrow blade unscabbarded and graven with ancient runes.

'Tis some creature of faerie!' said the woman, raising her hand in a gesture to ward off evil.

'My dear, sweet and gentle lady,' remarked the sprite, wincing as though cut to the quick, 'am I the cat's grandmother, to be spoken of thus? Though admittedly not human, I too have feelings; I too can be hurt by unkind words.'

'What is all this prattle?' growled the warrior, starting up the stairs. 'Let's see if you can make as much noise with my sword in your gullet, imp.'

The sprite danced nimbly back up the stairs away from him, feigning a look of horror. 'Oh, that is a big sword!' he gasped. 'I'm so frightened I might fade clean away . . .' As he said this, he drew level with an embrasure in the tower wall. Before the warrior could reach him, he had darted around the edge of the bevel, out of sight.

The warrior raced up the steps two at a time and swung round into the embrasure, skidding on the stone in his eagerness to catch his foe. But the sprite had vanished. In the guttering light of two tall candles, the warrior confronted just an empty bay with a narrow window at the back. Confused, he reached his arm through the window towards the glittering stars outside.

'It's barely a span wide,' he said to the woman as she caught up with him. 'Thin though he was, the imp couldn't have squeezed through here. It's hardly wide enough for a cat.' Even as he spoke, he knew the answer. But like many warriors, fearless of flesh-and-blood foes, he shied from any hint of sorcery.

'Don't let it unsettle you,' said the woman calmly. 'These beings are wily. Doubtless it has a few tricks up its sleeve yet, but we shall prevail - we must! We have not come so far from England to be thwarted at this late stage.'

There was a snigger from further up the tower. They stared up to see the sprite. Now he was perched above an archway at the top of the stairs, sharp white teeth shining in the candlelight.

'We must see your master!' called out the woman urgently. 'We're on a sacred quest, and we seek his help.'

The sprite blew on his nails and polished them against his tunic. 'Ho hum. That's nothing to do with humble me. He tells me to keep 'em out, and that's what I do. Now, will you leave quietly - or must I introduce you to Hoplos?'

'Who?' snarled the warrior, raising his sword. 'You vexing pixie, I'll be glad when I wear your head at my belt.'

The sprite gave a loud sigh. 'Really, milady, you ought to keep your bulldog here on a leash. Or, better still, dangling on a short rope.'

The warrior had been goaded enough. All his bluster faded to silence now, for he was one of those most dangerous men in whom anger produces a deathly cold calm. The slow smile that crept across his lips held a promise of impending violence. Framed by his beard and tangled hair, his face drained of colour until it seemed that his eyes were like shards of grey steel. In that terrible gaze, even the saucy sprite lost his flippancy. Suddenly, with a roar of fury, the warrior launched himself up the stairs.

'H-Hoplos,' the sprite managed to say, 'bit of help needed here, if you don't mind ...'

There was a clank of metal on stone, followed by a tall shadow that fell across the tower wall. A figure had appeared in the archway under the sprite. Though the brightest light came from behind it, the candles still picked out myriad burnished points. Encased from head to foot in plate armour, armed with a spiked flail and bearing a triangular shield that looked like the wing-case of a giant beetle, Hoplos advanced to give battle.

The warrior's senses told him something was amiss even before he had time to think. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Magic was at work here. Then he realized what it was: the sound of the giant figure's footsteps. They echoed hollowly, ringing out with each slow tread of its descent like the tolling of a great silver bell—

It was an empty suit of armour that he faced! A thing animated by a malevolent spirit! How could he slay an enemy who had no blood to spill . . . ?

The warrior could hear his companion beginning to hurry up the stairs, her light slippered feet padding on the marble. Already the armoured giant was bearing down towards him, and he could not imagine what she could do in any case. Without turning, he told her to stay back.

'Get out of the way,' she replied, scrabbling for something in the pouch at her waist. 'I have—'

'Too late.' The warrior grunted as his sword clashed with Hoplos' flail, the impact sending a shiver along the blade. The echo of metal against metal was almost deafening.

Unfazed, Hoplos swung his flail back and forth, chopping the air. Behind the bars of his visor there was just a dark implacable void. He did not need to draw breath, nor did he feel any injury from blows that buffeted his metal shell. The warrior was forced to take a step back - then another. The odds were all in his foe's favour: the curve of the stairs, designed to hamper anyone fighting up; his armoured opponent's tireless energy; the simple advantage of height. When their weapons struck each other the flail took no scratch, which told the warrior that it was enchanted like his own blade.

The sprite had dropped down from the keystone of the arch to dance above them on the landing. Whenever one of the warrior's strokes rattled in vain against Hoplos' armour, he gave a squeak of excitement: 'Drive them back and drive them down, Hoplos! Oh, you rash intruders, who thought to disturb my master's solitude.'

The battle had carried them back almost to the window embrasure. The woman backed into it, something now clenched in her pale hand. Hoplos'

gaze swung mechanically, taking this in. He began to swing his flail around and around, its spiked head slicing a circle through the air. He was ready to cut the warrior off if he should try to manoeuvre around into the embrasure.

In fact the warrior had precisely the opposite plan. Feinting in towards the tower wall, he abruptly shifted his weight outwards in the direction of the stairwell. At the same moment, he threw his sword over the armoured giant's head so that it landed some way up the stairs behind him.

Having no mind except for battle, Hoplos took instant advantage of his foe's apparent defencelessness. The flail changed direction, swinging hard up towards the warrior's body. Its momentum would dash him off the stairs - if it did not crack his ribs like twigs first.

The warrior made no attempt to dodge the blow. To the contrary, he stepped forward and allowed the weapon's chain to strike his side. The spiked ball swung round and crunched into his back, drawing rivulets of blood despite his coat of chainmail. The warrior acknowledged this with a single grunt of pain. Moving in close, he forced one hand over the helmet's empty visor and used the other to catch the flail's haft before Hoplos could draw it back for another blow. The impact was indeed carrying him over the side of the stairs, but the warrior had planned on exactly that. His toes somehow kept their purchase and, teetering on the brink, he swung around and then back in towards the tower wall, ending up on the other side of his unhuman foe.

Seeing her chance, the woman stepped in quickly and flung a cobweb-fine tissue across Hoplos' visor.

The warrior did not even bother to pick up the sword which lay at his feet. Catching hold of the edge of the embrasure and bracing his back against the wall, he set his feet against the automaton's massive silver breastplate and kicked out with all his strength. Hoplos, clawing at the webbing that was obscuring his vision, had no defence. He swayed back, a statue wobbling on its pedestal, and then toppled off the side of the stairs. A brief silence was broken by the tinny crash as he hit the bottom of the stairwell and broke into a dozen fragments.

Sweat matted the warrior's hair now, and his blood went drip-drip on the marble steps. He ignored it. Stooping to pick up his sword, he kept his gaze levelled on the sprite. 'Now, be you bogle or goblin or what-you-will, prepare to die!' he hissed.

'Oh, oh, oh!' The sprite looked to left and right as the warrior came up towards him. 'What am I to do? Stand here and let myself be slain, perhaps? No, that'll never do.' He drew the sharp silver dagger that hung from his belt.

The warrior narrowed his eyes, snorting in contempt as he trod closer. 'A little pin? I'll keep that to but my meat with, perhaps. 'Tis no true warrior's weapon.'

'Aha!' said the sprite. 'There's no fooling you, is there, fuzz-face? But the thing is, you see, I never claimed to be a true warrior!' And, as he said this, he vanished into thin air.

The warrior stopped at the top of the stairs, momentarily taken aback. He had little time for reverie, however. With a yelp more of surprise than pain, he felt a sharp slash which reopened the cut on his cheek.

'Touche!' said a voice from nowhere.

'Milady, he has gone invisible!' cried the warrior.

'As Garlon used to,' she called back cryptically as she swept up the stairway. 'Remember whose blade it is you bear; Sir Balin gave short shrift to such trickery.'

Again the sprite's knife lashed out, unseen, and a red wound opened across the warrior's knuckles. Growling, he swung his sword back and forth but encountered only empty air. The sprite gave a taunting laugh and struck again, this time a thrust that pierced the warrior's hauberk and left a deep gash in his shoulder. His veins fired with adrenalin, he felt more frustration than pain. Again he struck out blindly, and this time he was at least rewarded by the sprite's gasp of alarm as he had to jump over the wildly swinging sword.

The woman had by now reached them. On her way up, she had taken one of the candles that illuminated the tower. She raised it aloft, as though to give her champion better light.

'That won't do any good,' said the invisible sprite. 'The more light you have, the easier you can see that you can't see me - if that makes sense.'

In the instant that he spoke, the woman flicked the candle and sent a shower of hot waxy goblets over her companion's shoulder. Most splattered on the marble landing. One or two did not.

The warrior gave a great shout that rumbled off the tower walls as he thrust towards the drops of wax that still hung suspended in the air. There was a crackle of blue light from the sword-tip, a puff of vapour, and a howl of anguish that could never have come from any human throat. There was a clink as

the silver dagger dropped to the floor. The sprite turned partly visible and slumped back into the open arch with one hand pressed to his thigh. Violet ectoplasm, his life essence, seeped into the air from the wound.

'Aiee! I am cut to the quick,' he whimpered. 'Master, master - they have slain your faithful servant.'

The warrior charged forward, slashing his sword down for the killing blow. Instead it clanged against the side of the arch as the sprite dodged back on his good leg. 'On second thoughts, it seems to be just a flesh wound,' he said. 'Lucky me!'

'Confound you!' cried the warrior, following through with two more scything strokes that narrowly missed.

The battle carried through into a vaulted chamber beyond the arch. For all the sprite's drollery, he was obviously weak and could not hope to evade his enraged enemy for long. He just managed to duck another blow that broke chips of stone out of the pillar behind him. He crouched at the base of the pillar, his wounded leg folding under him, and looked up at the warrior's sword with a kind of resigned curiosity.

Before the lethal stroke could descend, double doors crashed open at the end of the room. All heads turned. An imposing figure stood there, arms behind his back in a posture of stern authority. His eyes held a fierce saturnine glare that had come from beholding things unknown to other men; and, though his neatly trimmed beard was streaked with grey, his broad shoulders and deep chest indicated unusual vigour. He took three steps forward into the light, and they saw that he wore a long tunic of night-black silk with

scarlet trim, and his gold cloak-clasp bore the emblem of an upraised hand enclosing the letter D.

The Lord of Dreams . . .' said the woman in tones of soft wonderment. She spoke in English for the first time that night.

'Some call me that,' returned the man, a slight growl like distant thunder in his words. 'Others have given me the soubriquet Sheik Khab. In my own land I am known as Treguard, Lord of Dunshelm.'

There was silence in the room, finally broken by the warrior speaking in Latin: 'This oldster is the one we sought?'

Treguard glared at him. 'Well, *lad*, I understand Latin too. Would you care to explain what errand brings you two bursting into my house in the dead of night?'

'Not to mention nearly killing your poor servant, master,' put in the sprite. 'Don't forget that . . .'

The woman went forward and bowed to Treguard. 'My lord, I apologize for our rudeness. We sought only to defend ourselves against the imp's snares, and when you hear our quest you will appreciate why we were so anxious to see you.'

'Be that as it may,' said Treguard dourly, 'perhaps you would first do me the courtesy of an introduction. Then and not before, my young visitors, we might consider that quest of yours.'

The woman nodded, her customary composure soon returning. 'I am Erica, a lady of England.'

'Indeed?' Treguard raised his eyebrows and gave a slight smile. The expression made him look still more sinister. 'I do not recognize your accent, milady.'

'I am from Cornwall.'

Treguard nodded. 'Ah, then. And your fierce

young friend, who seems to know nothing beyond swordplay and Latin?'

Erica glanced at the warrior and licked her lips hesitantly, searching for the right words. At length she faced Treguard, her youthful face set purposefully. 'What I shall tell you is almost beyond belief, noble lord, but I beg you to listen to my words and weigh them carefully, for what I say touches upon a sacred matter that is of more importance to fair England than any other thing in all the world.'

'Speak on. I'll listen.'

'My lord, the quest that has brought us to Acre is nothing less than the recovery of the Holy Grail, the chalice that Christ drank from at the Last Supper, that treasure of Britain that was foremost of King Arthur's royal insignia.'

Treguard considered this, still with the same wry smile. The Holy Grail, eh? And what makes you think, young lady, that such a treasure might be found by you two, when it eluded Arthur's knights for so many years?'

Erica looked at him with a sparkle in her eye and played the trump card: 'Why, my lord, because this man who accompanies me is in truth one of the knights of the Round Table! In fact he is the greatest of those knights. *He is Sir Lancelot.*'

CHAPTER TWO

Treguard waited until they were all ensconced in his study before pursuing the matter.

Behind his oaken chair, a tapestry of rich colours depicted the countryside of Treguard's native England - a land he had not seen in five years. Five years in the Holy Land, enduring the greed and infighting and squalor that made up the city of Acre. Five years in which Treguard had seen honest battles against the foe give way to a purposeless round of banquets, tomfoolery jousts and petty scheming. Increasingly, the various Crusader factions preferred to take easy profit at one another's expense than ride forth to face the foe. Treguard would have returned home long since, but for the nagging suspicion that there was yet one last great goal to be achieved here before the Christians were driven out of this part of the world for ever. Treguard, whose ancestral heritage was Nightmare Castle, had grown accustomed to premonitions and strange adventures. And so he had chosen to linger here, even while many of his comrades such as Dugald of St Julien despaired of the way that selfish commerce and bloodthirsty rapine had perverted the Crusade's once-proud ideals. Treguard could understand such disillusionment. He had felt it too, in his youth, when he stood at a rain-lashed parapet overlooking Constantinople

and watched with sick horror while the city was ransacked. But that had been a decade ago - no, more like a lifetime; now he was a man driven by purpose, almost a being of myth himself. The Lord of Dreams.

The Lord of Nightmare.

The sprite, Pickle, crouched beside his master's chair like a hound, licking the wound on his thigh and dabbing at it with a compress of alchemic herbs. Occasionally he flung a sharp sidelong glance at the newcomers.

Erica sat with hands folded demurely across her lap. Her face was tilted up, the firelight in the grate dancing in her eyes and stroking a rosy glow across her soft white cheek. Her ebon hair hung down, half across one eye, and seemed to merge into the folds of her black silk gown. In serenity she was like the Madonna herself shown on an icon; in ethereal appearance, she looked almost as much a creature of elfland as Pickle.

Lancelot - if indeed he was the legendary warrior he claimed to be - lounged beside her on the bench, glowering at the contents of a wine goblet which he kept refilling from the pitcher at his elbow. He left his own wounds untended, apparently considering them too minor to be worth bothering with.

'You'll understand my scepticism,' Treguard was saying. 'By most people's reckoning Lancelot has been dead for seven hundred years.'

Lancelot looked up with a puzzled frown.

'We must converse in Latin,' Erica gently insisted; 'he does not understand English.'

'This man is a Saxon,' said Lancelot in Latin. 'What help can he be to Britain?'

'What was once Britain is now England.' Treguard studied him with narrowed eyes. He had learned Latin during his days on the Fourth Crusade, when company with warriors of a dozen different lands forced them to find a common tongue. At first glance it did not seem that the younger man's impertinence had ruffled his composure, but the whitening of his big knuckles where he gripped the arms of the chair showed that he was not to be trifled with.

Lancelot, seeing this, bowed to him and spoke with more respect: 'Your pardon. In my day, the Saxons were our adversaries and we fought hard and long to keep them from our shores. Now I have wakened into a very different world; Arthur sleeps in Avalon, while the Saxons are now dispossessed of the land they in their turn took from us.'

'It is the same land, with the same faith,' pointed out Treguard. 'We both aspire to Chivalry, good sir knight. Do not be deluded, as I once was, into thinking that a man's race counts for the merest jot. Truth lies in the heart.'

'Well said!' cried Lancelot, draining his goblet with a swift flourish that left trickles of wine in his beard. 'I shall be pleased to have you as my companion in this adventure.'

Pickle smiled shrewdly into the hearth. 'Methinks the fellow is a little presumptuous,' he murmured to Treguard. 'Are you flattered that he so soon accepts you as his companion, master?'

'Your imp is not slow in venturing his opinion, my lord Treguard,' remarked Erica.

'Quite so.' Treguard raised his hand as though to cuff the sprite, but made do with an admonitory glare instead. Tickle thinks like a fay, of course -

mischievous and fanciful - but in this case his reasoning is sound. So: how can you prove that what you claim is true, sir knight?'

Before Lancelot could answer, Erica leaned forward. 'First, let me tell you how I came upon Sir Lancelot.'

'Speak on,' said Treguard with a nod.

'This should be an interesting tale . . .' mused Pickle under his breath.

'I am from Pollton, which is a village in Cornwall,' she began. 'One day - some months ago now - I set out to the market in Camelford with a fine white stallion. It was a long journey, so I set out at cockcrow. To reach Camelford I had to pass an old standing-stone which is locally called the Yeth Ring, having a hole right through its breadth large enough for a man. As I drew level with the stone, the horse gave a bray of fright and in the deep twilight shadows I saw an old man. He stood on the other side of the stone, but I could see him through the hole. He looked like an old toad peeking out at me, robes like dry leaf and a dirty beard the colour of dead moss. "Ey, lassie," he called to me, winking his one good eye. "That stallion you have to sell - I'd buy it."

'Naturally I was somewhat wary. "Thank you," I called back, "but I'll wait to see what price he'll fetch at Camelford market."

'"I'll give you two full bags of silver and a roll of cloth-of-gold," he said with an old man's cackle. "Think on it." Nonetheless I insisted on going on to Camelford, where I was sure I'd get a better price. So finally he said to me: "Be on your way, then, pretty maid. But none will buy yon horse, an' when you return this way at dusk I'll be here again with the sum agreed."

I thought no more of this throughout the day. It was as if it were a dream that had completely fled from my waking mind. So I was quite surprised that no-one at the market wanted to buy my horse - all agreed he was a fine beast, but there was always this or that objection, some reason why he would not do. It was only as I returned home with the last rays of sunset that I saw the Yeth Ring, and then the morning's incident came back to me.

"There you are, sweet damesel," came the old man's creaking voice, "an' with your good white stallion, I'm hearty glad to see. None in Camelford knows a bargain, then; but I'll still buy him. My offer's still good."

I peered at him through the hole in the stone, not so frightened as I'd been that morning. In truth, the whole thing still seemed half a dream. Only the highest clouds yet wore a tracery of sunlit gold - all the rest of the land was blue dusk, the old man but a shadow under his wide-brimmed hat. "Aye, then," I agreed. "Yours is the only offer I've had all day, and not a bad one at that."

I was about to walk around the stone, but he held up a hand. "Not that way, girl," he said. "Jump you through the hole." I was bemused, but struck by the whimsy of it I handed him the reins and then clambered through to where he waited. Strangely, he already had the horse beside him - though of course he would never have fitted through the ring himself.

"Well, without another word the old man went off into the west, and despite his age I had to lift my skirts and fairly race through the heather to keep up. We walked westwards while all the light drained out

of the land, and then we walked in darkness. After a while he stopped, and in the starlight I could just make out the hump of a great mound in the earth. It loomed over us, and then a glimmer of lamplight picked out a stone doorway in its side. I had not noticed the lamp he carried before.

"This is where he lies, who once was king and will again be," muttered the old man, leading the stallion through the open doorway and down a wide time-worn flight of steps. I followed the lamp, full of fear but dreading darkness more. The horse's shoes scuffed sparks off the hard granite flagstones. Down we went, deep down, and the only smell was dank air. Finally I felt a breeze on my face and knew we had come to a chamber far under the ground. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw that it was a domed room with such a high vault that the lamplight could not reach it. In the centre of the room was a great round table with many seats, and behind each seat was a slab on which a knight lay, to the number of twelve times twelve. Though caparisoned for war, with shield and sword across his breast, each of the knights was as pale as death, but unblemished by any decay.

Many of the knights had horses that waited by them, heads bowed in sleep. Every horse was a white stallion. The old man turned to me and said, "You will leave here only what you have given, and take with you only what I shall give." So saying, he led the horse off to stand beside one of the sleeping knights, whispering a word that left him as still as a white statue.

While the wizard was doing this, I looked down at the slab bearing the nearest of the knights. Though

mindful of what he had told me, I found myself moved with pity at their plight. It seemed so sad, to slumber dreamlessly for ever in the cold earth. So I bent, and placed a kiss on the poor knight's lips.

'At once it was as though a thunderbolt had stabbed right down through the rock to where we stood. There was a terrible blast of light, accompanied by a deafening din like the clash of Titans' swords. I was hurled off my feet, and for some time that was the last I knew . . .

I woke with my gown soaked by dew, shivering, but with a warm breath of wind across my brow. Dawn was breaking over the moor. Beside me on the damp grass knelt the knight I had kissed, awake now, his sword planted in front of him like a cross as he kept vigil. Of the mound, and the old man, and all the other sleeping knights, there was nary a sign. Seeing my eyes open, the knight spoke to me in his archaic Latin. That was when I learned he was Sir Lancelot.

'I know it is a difficult tale to believe,' Erica concluded, eyes shyly downcast. 'Recounting it now, I wonder myself that it could have happened.' She suddenly met Treguard's gaze with her own, and he was surprised by the force of will he saw there. 'But happen it did.'

Treguard set aside his goblet. As one who knew of such things, he found her tale had a ring of truth. After all, he was hardly one to scoff at the mysterious - he, who had encountered dragons, elves, dwarves and oakmen in his time. Possibly the very Fiend himself, too, if his suspicions about the previous master of Knightmare Castle were true. So, for more than an hour, he pressed the so-called Lancelot with

questions: the whereabouts and details of Arthur's battles, the alliances and marriages of his vassals, the exploits of his knights.

Lancelot knew every answer. For a scholar of the thirteenth century to have arcane knowledge that matched that of the Lord of Knightmare would have been strange enough. For any common fighting-man it would be unthinkable. Treguard leaned back in his chair, fingers absently stroking his beard, and pondered.

'Let me peer into his thoughts, master,' Pickle suggested, 'and there scry the truth.'

'Oh, be quiet, Pickle,' said Treguard. 'You know very well that the likes of you cannot see into mortal hearts.' He looked up sharply. 'But wait - that gives me an idea. Turn your attention to his sword. It is magical, is it not? Discern its history.'

Pickle bounded to his feet, limping slightly, and made a graceful bow to Lancelot. There may have been a hint of mockery in the gesture. 'Lady,' he said, 'will your champion give me his sword for a moment?'

'Is this goblin deranged?' snarled Lancelot when the request was translated for him. 'The only way he'll have my sword is in his unhuman guts!'

'Come, come,' whispered Erica, stroking his arm. 'It is the only way to prove yourself to Lord Treguard.'

Reluctantly, the burly warrior at last consented to placing the flat of his sword across Pickle's palm. He kept his hand on the pommel.

Pickle winced his almond eyes and concentrated, a grimace of pain curling the corners of his mouth. After a minute, he released the sword and turned to

Treguard. There was a faint waft of sulphur in the air, and the blade had left a dark weal on his skin. 'Master, it is the sword originally used by Sir Balin, another of Arthur's knights. I cannot tell its name because its magic is too mighty. After Balin's death it was kept in the armoury at Camelot, against the day when it would be wielded in final battle by "the best knight of the world". No other could use this sword except in peril of its curse, which is that one day it would deal him a mortal injury.'

'And the best knight of the world, Pickle? Who was that?'

'Master,' said Pickle with a glance at their guests, 'it was Sir Lancelot.'

A log hissed and cracked in the grate.

'From a learned monk in Exeter,' Lancelot said, 'the lady Erica and I found that a few knights of the Round Table are reputed to have survived the battle against Mordred, which took place at Slaughter Bridge - not far from Camelford. One such knight was the doughty Sir Bleoberis, in whose safekeeping Arthur had left the Holy Grail. Most accounts of the tune survive in the form of parchment scraps at best, and more often as sheer rumour, but all agree that Bleoberis betook himself on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Apparently he left it in a chapel there, from which it was later stolen and taken to a place "beyond the groves of Hadramaut" - wherever that is. That is why we made the journey to Acre. I intend to discharge my pledge to Arthur by recovering the Grail.'

Treguard nodded non-committally. 'And what, specifically, brought you to my house?'

'The task I do, I cannot do alone,' replied

Lancelot. 'All we spoke to accounted you the bravest and most true knight in Acre.'

'Also . . .' put in Erica, 'well, you have an eldritch reputation, Lord Treguard. People hereabouts say you are no stranger to weird adventures. In our hostelry, there was one fellow who spoke of—'

Treguard held up a hand to stop her. 'Ah, most of those tales are just so much make-believe,' he said, embarrassed at being cast in the role of hero yet again. 'But let us suppose for a moment that I accept all you've said . . . There is one man in Acre who will be able to tell us if the Grail was indeed brought here to the East, and that is Emeritus, a humble fellow who serves as deacon at the Church of St Ely. By good fortune he is a friend of mine, as well as a great scholar, and he has often remarked to me of his interest in Arthurian matters.'

Erica and Lancelot looked at each other. 'We should go to see him,' the lady said, turning to Treguard.

Treguard yawned. 'It will keep till morning, I think. Pickle, prepare beds for—'

'We should go now!' broke in Lancelot, coming to his feet. 'Most noble lord, in the few days we have spent here in Acre we have begun to sense that others are dogging our trail. Possibly we were too incautious in our investigations, but somehow a rumour of our purpose has reached the ears of someone who believes - and means to profit by it. God knows, this city is a den of vice!'

'I cannot dispute that,' concurred Treguard, rising from his chair. 'It would be nothing less than dire tragedy if the Grail were to fall into evil hands. Well then, let us go to call on Emeritus now. He'll scarcely

appreciate being woken in the small hours, but I am sure that when he hears the tale you told me he'll lose all thought of sleep in any case!"

The moon was close to setting as they made their way along a dingy street towards the great central wall of the city. The stink of filth was in the air, the ground underfoot a noisome slough of mud and ordure. Beggars lay like rolled-up rugs along the route, their coughs and snores punctuating the silence, and the three had to step over them as their shoes slipped in the foul mire. The sprite, who skipped ahead with a lantern of carved horn, avoided all such obstacles without difficulty.

Some way off to the left, the slender spires of the Genoese Quarter rose above the squat nearby rooftops. Each tower's height proclaimed the wealth of its inhabitants, and in this vain boastfulness it was not unknown for a tower to collapse from having been built too slender for its height.

Lancelot had brought the pitcher of wine with him. As he took a lusty swig, he noticed Treguard's sidelong glance of rebuke. 'In seven centuries it is possible to develop a mighty thirst,' he said.

'Better you leave that for these wretches,' said Treguard, indicating the sleeping beggars. 'We may need our wits about us if another group also seek the Grail.'

'He's right.' Erica gently took the pitcher from Lancelot's hand and tossed it into the gutter. He scowled, but said nothing.

Vast turrets rose against the night sky ahead, squat sentinels of a deeper black than the grey-tinged fuligin of the clouds. They marked out intervals

along a crenellated wall as high as a cathedral. Clearing the warren of backstreets, Treguard and his companions were grateful for a fresh breeze that blew in off the sea to the west.

Pointing along the wall, Treguard said, 'That is the Gate of the Evil Step. On the other side of the wall lies the suburb of Montmusard, where Emeritus has his home.'

'Won't the guards be alarmed by your imp?' said Lancelot, as Pickle led them towards the gate.

'He is visible only to us. I have not lived so long by being careless, sir knight.'

At their approach, a group of sentries emerged from the thick shadow of the gate and formed a loose cordon, fingers on the hilts of their swords. Their sergeant, a short man with more hair on his chin than on his head, stepped forward to address Treguard: 'Who are you three, to be abroad in pitch darkness? State your business.'

'I am Treguard, Lord of Dunshelm. My colleagues are of the English gentry. We wish to pass through to Montmusard, as an urgent matter requires us to visit a friend there.'

The sergeant sniffed. His accent marked him out as French, and no friend to Englishmen. 'Come back in the morning,' he said curtly. 'There's been some trouble in Montmusard tonight.'

'Is this cur trying to bar our way?' grated Lancelot. He turned to confront the sergeant squarely with his considerable stature. He flexed his hand significantly before resting it on the pommel of his sword. 'Step aside, you churl, or you'll watch your own steaming entrails line the road!'

The sergeant did not understand the words, but he

knew clearly enough he was being threatened. He backed off slightly, feeling more secure with his men at his elbow. 'Push off home and take this rude oaf with you, that's my advice,' he said, addressing the remark to Treguard. 'If you get into trouble with the gate Watch, then it won't matter if you're the king's uncle.'

Erica shook her head and gave a long-suffering sigh. 'Lancelot, how many times have I told you that an ounce of tact is worth a pound of confrontation?'

'And magic often works better than either,' Treguard said to her. Raising a gloved hand to his mouth, he made an aside to Pickle: 'Now, my tricky spirit, I'll leave this one to you. Bedazzle them; bereave them of their wits.'

It delighted Pickle to be given a rare chance to work mischief. Racing forward with a grace impossible for any human dancer, he moved under the guards' eyes unseen and blew a faerie dust into their faces. All of them at once began to blink and looked around, mouths gaping as though they struggled to recall some point that had eluded them.

'They will remain like this for several minutes,' said Treguard, striding past Lancelot and the confounded guards. 'Come.'

'That is a pretty trick, imp,' said Erica, following. 'Can you use it on any foe?'

'If only I could, milady,' admitted Pickle, nonetheless smirking vainly, 'but the dust works only on those whose wits are dull or tired - and not even on them, once battle has been joined. Had it been more useful, I would have used it on your good self and Lord Lancelot when I took you for robbers earlier tonight.'

'Of course,' Erica nodded, 'of course . . .'

Montmusard was less squalid than the city proper - at least in the part they now traversed, along an avenue planted with poplars. There were still beggars, though: grumbling human sacks who stirred to lifewith croaking curses as they passed by.

Reaching a small square paved with stones, Treguard paused to let the others catch up. He pointed to a small cross-shaped building with a fountain and a grass verge in front of it. 'That is the Church of St Ely. Emeritus lives in a small house adjoining it.'

They crossed the square, but as they drew closer to the house Pickle furrowed his brow. His faerie senses told him something was amiss, even before the sight of his horn-slatted lamp shone on the open doorway.

'No-one in Acre leaves his door open at night,' muttered Treguard, drawing his sword at once. He dropped into a crouch and darted forward to one side of the door.

Lancelot had no respect for caution. Launching himself at the door, he slammed it open with his shoulder, dived to the floor and rolled on his shoulder to come up on the other side of the vestibule. 'Nothing in here,' he called after a second. 'I'm going up the stairs.'

'Wait!' growled Treguard, cursing under his breath. He knew that the thieves of Acre were second to none in all the world, drawn as they were from the harshest prisons of Europe. Western courts had for some time taken to deporting their worst criminals to the Holy Land. If Emeritus had indeed been burgled, and if the miscreants were still in his house,

they would certainly have been alerted by Lancelot's reckless entrance.

There was the rapid staccato of booted footsteps as Lancelot charged up the stairs. Treguard and Erica heard the sound of splintering wood on the floor above.

'Pickle, come,' Treguard said simply.

The sprite slunk close. 'Aye, my master? What's your wish?'

'Go you up there, invisible, and tell us what's happening.'

'My lord, it shall be done.' Pickle vanished along with his lantern, leaving Treguard and Erica in total darkness.

'Curse the fay for his thoughtlessness!' exploded Treguard, in fact more annoyed at Lancelot's headstrong behaviour than at Pickle.

At once the lantern reappeared beside him, with Pickle in its pool of radiance. 'You may as well go up, master and milady,' he said to them. There has in truth been a felony, but I'd say the villains vanished long since.'

With Treguard leading the way, they raced up the stairs. By his magic, Pickle was already waiting for them when they reached the landing. He gestured towards a room whose door hung in, half broken off its hinges. Lancelot stood just beyond, staring around him, his sword lowered.

Treguard stepped forward, dreading what he would find. The room had been Emeritus' study, but now it was a shambles. In the light of a guttering flambeau set in a bracket by the door, Treguard took in the details of the scene with stunned detachment. Torn scrolls littered the floor and dusty books had

spilled from broken shelves. Across the desk and the wall behind it there was a long splash of red, as though a swath of wet silk were plastered there. Treguard followed its line down to the floor, and there amid the debris his eyes found the sight that he most feared to see. The body of his dear friend, the scholar Emeritus. A sword-blow had laid his chest open to the depth of the heart.

Treguard knelt beside the corpse and wiped a slick of blood off its brow before gently closing the staring horror-struck eyes. 'Oh, merciful God,' he groaned, 'how hast Thou let this happen?'

Erica, as calm as ever, had immediately started to search through the wreckage. Soon she found something: an old book from which a handful of sheets had been hastily torn. There were bloody blotches on the remaining pages. She turned the book around and read a title imprinted on the cover: *The History of the Last Knights of The Round Table* . . . According to the date on this, it was written only forty years after Arthur's death! And a number of pages at the start have been torn out. We were right - someone else *is* after the Grail!

'Eh?' Treguard looked up as Lancelot laid a hand on his shoulder.

'I am sorry about your friend,' said Lancelot. 'But whoever killed him and took those documents must be stopped. The Grail must not fall into evil hands.'

'You are right.' Treguard put his cloak over Emeritus' body and stood up. His joints were stiffer than they had been ten years ago. He wondered wearily whether he still had the stamina for such adventures.

His reverie was broken by Pickle bounding into

the room. 'Master, master - there are others outside! I saw them hiding in the mouth of an alleyway.'

'The murderers, no doubt,' said Lancelot at once. He scowled and went to open the shutter across the window, but Erica stopped him.

'And . . . ?' demanded Treguard. 'Who *are* they, Pickle?'

'Seven men of the Knights Templar, master . . . ' The sprite seemed hesitant, wary of Treguard's wrath. 'Among them is your old acquaintance, Rupert of Armitage.'

Rupert of Armitage was a foe of long standing, and there was no love lost between him and Treguard. Nonetheless, in the three years since Rupert had joined the Templars in Acre their paths had seldom crossed. He had claimed that his reason for taking holy orders was to atone for the sins of his youth. Treguard, knowing the scope of those sins, doubted that Rupert could so easily mend his ways. But three years had passed without major incident, and he had begun almost to forgive Rupert's former treachery. Until now.

'*What?*' roared Treguard, his eruption of rage frightening Pickle so much that he cowered back under the desk. 'Rupert! Is he the one who committed this foul crime, then? By God, I swear his blood will mingle with my poor friend's here if that is so!'

'Not so long ago you were blaming Lancelot for being impetuous,' Erica reminded him, her tranquil voice soothing his anger. 'We must consider why these Templars are keeping the house under observation.'

'Having robbed and killed this man, they hope to

find out who else seeks the Grail,' was Lancelot's theory.

Treguard nodded, stroking his neatly-trimmed beard as he usually did when deep in thought. 'And we have stumbled straight into the trap ... Or have we? Since Pickle's faerie light was invisible to anyone other than ourselves, Rupert and his brother Templars cannot have seen us enter. Therefore—'

Pickle had flitted out again to reconnoitre. Now he returned with the news that the Templars were converging on the building.

'They must have heard the noise we made,' realized Erica, looking reproachfully at Lancelot as she said it. 'Lord Treguard, can your pixie turn us invisible also?'

Treguard gave a snort of wry laughter. 'Would that he could! It would have saved me some inconvenience during several risky escapades, I can tell you.' Then a thought struck him. 'We can't go invisible, but maybe the reverse ... '

The others watched, baffled, as Treguard went to the back of the room and pushed back a wooden casement. The window opened on to a narrow alley on the other side of the house from the Templars, but it was too far down to jump. Treguard got on to the windowsill and craned his neck to look up. 'Yes, we can reach the roof from here,' he said. 'Come along.'

'But then we'll be trapped on top of the building,' protested Erica. 'If the Templars catch us, they're sure to blame us for this man's murder.'

Treguard shook his head. 'They'll be too busy elsewhere. Pickle, conjure up a band of phantasms . . . '

'Phantasms of what, master?'

'Of murderers, foolish fellow! Midnight rogues with bloody daggers, creeping off from some fell deed! It matters not, so long as they distract the Templars long enough for us to escape.'

Pickle duly did as ordered. A wave of his hands, and a group of hooded figures appeared by the doorway. They held sharp knives, and wore veils to hide their faces. At first glance they seemed very lifelike indeed - until one noticed the unnatural chiaroscuro and the way their outlines wavered out of focus.

'How is this, master? A veritable artwork of unreality. A mirage masterwork!'

'It will do,' Treguard granted with a dour nod. He reached out for Erica's arm. 'Now, milady, let me help you up to the roof. Pickle, send the illusions downstairs.'

As they scrambled up on to the flat roof, they heard shouts from the square at the front of the house. Lying prone, Treguard crawled across to take a peek. To his satisfaction, he saw Rupert and the other Templars spreading out to apprehend the illusory villains that Pickle had magicked up. Rupert himself was holding a torch aloft, the familiar arrogant sneer stamped on his fine features. The torchlight made his white surcoat blaze in the night, the red cross on his breast as bright as blood. With his tall frame and golden hair he might have been taken for an angel, if not for the streak of cruelty that was evident in his face even from here.

Rupert's petulant voice echoed up amid the general shouting: 'Arrest those men! Don't let them escape!'

'That's our cue,' Treguard hissed back to the others.

Darting back from the edge of the roof, he pointed out a short jump down to an adjoining building on the other side of the alley. Sometimes, when the heat of summer raised a fetid haze in Acre's airless backstreets, or when he had had to step sharply aside to avoid a bucket of refuse emptied from an overhanging window, Treguard had wished the city were built with wider thoroughfares. This was not one of those times. Taking a running leap, he landed on the opposite roof and stumbled, taking a hard crack on his knee. It would have a ripe bruise by tomorrow, he reflected, rubbing the leg and once more wondering whether he ought not to leave adventuring to younger men.

Lancelot seemed to confirm this by making an agile jump despite his heavy build and encumbrance of armour. He dropped softly beside Treguard, quiet as a cat, and turned to catch Erica as she followed them.

This building had a clay-brick staircase on the outside wall. As they hastened away to descend to street level, Treguard heard a single snatch of Rupert's wrath as Pickle's illusions faded: 'We've been tricked! They've got away . . .'

In a night that had mingled mystery with dark tragedy, that at least brought a faint smile to his face.

CHAPTER THREE

'By the Goddess! What creature is this? I have never seen its like!'

They were in the seafront market, having arrived along with the dawn and the first merchants. The sun had yet to burn away the mist which often came in off the sea in early morning, and the city's spires and domes shone in a soft haze. The air up on the rooftops held a delicious cool with the promise of a balmy warmth to come. Across the length and breadth of the city, the bells of a score of churches rang joyously as though to herald the arrival of a new day.

Down in the streets, this facade of ethereal beauty gave way to grim reality. People packed the teeming avenues leading into the market square, and already there was a rancid stink of din and sweat. Beggars crawled out from under their blankets and crouched wretchedly amid the rotting refuse, trembling hands extended towards any passer-by who so much as gave them a glance. Searching for scraps, a pack of mangy dogs scampered between the market-goers' legs and snuffled in the dirt. The day's warmth had also roused the flies that were a constant plague to life in Acre. They swarmed about, a dull drone behind the shrill hubbub of the market, treading in the dried dung underfoot and the fruits laid out on the stalls.

'Did you call, Lady Erica?'

Treguard strode over to her, pushing the rabble aside. He now wore flowing sendal robes of grey and white - the garment that the Arabs called a burnoose - with a broad silver belt into which he had tucked a curved dagger. A blue glass bottle also hung by his side, in which he had confined his sprite for safe-keeping. As he came up, Treguard was outlined for a moment against the gold disk of the sun where it shimmered above the morning mist, his face in shadow, robes billowing in the light sea breeze, and in that moment Erica saw why the natives of the region called him Sheik Khab. If not for his skin, paler than any Arab's despite his tan, "he could have been the fierce lord of some desert tribe.

Erica cast a wary look at the animal that had startled her. Glowering on its haunches, it returned the look for a few moments, then made a curious hissing sound and turned disdainfully away.

Treguard tucked his thumbs in his belt and laughed. 'Do not be alarmed, my lady. It is only a camel.'

She joined in with a trill of laughter. 'Well, we never had any beast like that at home in Camelford!'

They had come to the market to equip for the long journey that lay ahead. The single clue known to Lancelot and Erica - that whoever had stolen the Grail from Jerusalem had taken it 'beyond the groves of Hadramaut' - had struck a chord with Treguard. In his library, he found that the Hadramaut was the southernmost region of Arabia. It was more than a thousand miles from Acre. Treguard knew that much of that distance consisted of vast stretches of scorching desert. The preparations they made

now could spell the difference later between life and death.

Lancelot had gone striding on ahead towards the far end of the market square, where on a raised platform a merchant was parading several horses. Noticing that his companions had fallen behind, he came back, roughly shoving away anyone who strolled into his path.

'Hey, you lout! Watch who you're pushing!' yelled one fellow, a gruff tousel-headed squire with a scar across his lip. He whirled around in anger and found himself staring at Lancelot's broad chest. Swallowing nervously, he tilted his head to look up at the knight's face.

'You're in my way,' rumbled Lancelot. He picked the man up by the front of his jerkin and sat him down in a display of wet fish in a nearby stall.

The stall-owner, knowing better than to tangle with a man of Lancelot's size and obvious temper, at once began to harangue the blameless squire. As others joined in the scuffle, Lancelot made his way back to the others.

'Let's try to avoid attracting attention from now on,' said Treguard dourly, observing the commotion.

'Bah!' retorted Lancelot. 'I am a knight of the Round Table! It is not my way to go scurrying about furtively like a varlet.' He glared at Treguard. 'And do not presume to give me orders, Saxon.'

As usual, it was Erica who calmed the situation. '**Treguard** is our comrade,' she reminded Lancelot, 'and we have all agreed on the need for discretion. What would become of our quest if we were seized by the Templars and left to rot in their dungeons?'

Lancelot answered her with a sour nod, then

gestured across the market. 'Should we not be buying our horses for the journey, then? I am eager to be off.'

'**Treguard** feels we'd do better with these . . . camels,' said Erica with a smile.

Lancelot goggled at the camel. It peered back lugubriously, making a keening growl in its throat. '*This?* The stench of it alone is enough to empty a man's stomach, and its shape strikes me as both ridiculous and uncomfortable. Why choose such a beast over a good horse?'

'For several reasons,' said Treguard, 'not the least of which is cost. Any horse of equal usefulness might set us back a hundred dinars or more, whereas I am sure we can acquire a group of camels for no more than five dinars apiece.'

Hearing this, the swarthy camel-merchant who had been watching them from the canopy of his stall stepped hurriedly forward. 'Did I hear you mention five dinars, mighty master?' he said, white teeth flashing in a grin. 'A bargain indeed, for these are the finest camels that Arabia can offer. Ah, I see you're surprised that I, Ghazi, a bedouin from the far south, should speak the elegant Latin tongue. In the breadth of my learning, as in so many other ways, I am indeed an exceptional man. Fate has guided you wisely in bringing you to Ghazi's stall. Now, was the sum mentioned fifty dinars . . . ?'

Treguard put an arm around the man's shoulder. He knew that, as well as reliable riding-animals, they would also need a guide. 'Let us discuss the camels' price over a cup of coffee, my friend. You are a bedouin from the south, you say? Good, good. In that case, we may wish to employ your services . . . '

'Brother Rupert! The magician is here to see you.'

Rupert of Armitage stood at a window of the Templars' preceptory, hands resting between the bars, looking out into the velvet dusk. The clouds were distant wisps of amber in a midnight blue sky, and the heady scent of jasmine hung in the evening air. It was an idyllic scene, a moment of rare respite from the turmoil of a Crusading life, but Rupert was too preoccupied to savour it. A moment passed before he noticed the servant's arrival.

'Show him in,' he said, turning away from window. He suddenly shivered and, pulling his white cape around him, called sharply after the servant: 'And light the torches - it's almost dark in here.'

His eyes were focused on the gothic arch of the doorway, where now a figure took shape in the light of the servant's candle. Like Rupert, he wore white robes emblazoned with a scarlet cross - but the inside of his cloak was deepest black, and embroidered in silver with tiny alchemical runes that were revealed only when he moved.

'Tancred,' said Rupert, acknowledging the magician's arrival with a nod, 'it has been two days now. I hope that by your arts you've gleaned something useful in this time.'

Tancred came forward, fondling the crucifix around his neck with slim delicate fingers. He was a slight man, with a scholarly mien, and unlike the others of the Order he wore no armour or weaponry. Nor did he have the usual Templar's expression of unyielding zeal. With his thinning thatch of carrotty hair and limpid eyes, he looked more like a clerk.

Certainly no-one who did not know of his reputation would have guessed him to be the greatest Christian sorcerer in the Holy Land.

'Useful?' he said to Rupert. 'I believe so. Firstly, Emeritus' room was redolent of strong sorcery. I am sure a fay had been there shortly before us.'

Rupert failed to suppress a supercilious smile. 'I rather gathered that sorcery had been at work, brother. We were duped by phantasms, after all; such things do not occur naturally. That's why I sought your advice.'

'You were right to do so.' Tancred nodded emphatically. 'You'll recall that the door was broken in - needlessly, in fact, since it had not been bolted. Well, on a splinter of wood I found this scrap of cloth.'

'Really?' said Rupert, sarcastically adopting an interested tone as he scrutinized the torn cloth that Tancred was holding. 'And what does this tell you?'

Tancred stared at him, making no attempt to disguise his own contempt. 'It was worn by one of those you seek,' he said huffily. 'When this cloth is fixed within my divining pendulum, I can determine where its owner is now. The direction of the pendulum's swing shows his heading, you see, while its frequency—'

Rupert waved a hand to interrupt. 'If true, that's excellent news. I'll fetch some of the brethren, and we'll go to apprehend the fellow.'

'It won't be as easy as that,' Tancred replied. 'Your quarry has already left the city. From my observations, I'd say they set out yesterday morning - the day after Emeritus' death.'

'How many are there?' said Rupert, scowling. 'And where are they heading?'

Tancred shrugged. 'The exact numbers, I cannot say. The cloak that had been draped over the corpse would not respond to my divination - further evidence that our enemies have powerful sorcery. The pendulum only tells me the whereabouts of the cloth's former wearer. As to where he and his companions are going - south, I'd say, to Araby.'

'Whoever they are, they must not be allowed to reach the Grail first! Go and pack your magical accoutrements; we shall need you to counter the enemy's sorcery.'

As Tancred left the room, Rupert beckoned to the servant: 'Send the others to me. And order the horses saddled. We ride out tonight.'

Some days out of Acre, as they passed through hills beside the Dead Sea, Treguard and his companions realized they were being followed.

It was Ghazi, the bedouin camel-trader whom they had hired as a guide, who was the first to spot the pursuers. His harsh life in the Arabian desert had left him with a sixth sense for danger. While the others paused for a lunch of dry biscuits and watered wine which they took in the shade of an overhanging rock, he climbed up to survey the road along which they had passed that morning. The news when he returned was much as Treguard had feared. A party of Knight Templars was hot on their trail. He returned to the vantage point Ghazi had found and squinted down the hillside. In the glare of the Levant sunshine, plumes of dust rose from the hooves of seven horses ridden by white-cloaked knights.

'Well, mighty master?' enquired Ghazi after a moment. 'Is it the foe you spoke of - this Rupert of Armitage and his cronies?'

Treguard chewed at his lower lip. 'It's too far to be sure, my friend. And yet it must be - or, at any rate, we lose nothing by assuming the worst.'

Lancelot had clambered up the rockface to join them. 'Of course it is our enemy,' he said. 'Why else would a group of these red-cross knights traverse such inhospitable territory?'

'Not as inhospitable to them as to us, unfortunately,' muttered Treguard, still gazing down the valley. 'The Templars have allies among the Saracens who rule the land we've been passing through. They will have had no trouble getting fresh provisions along the route. Perhaps even a change of horses.'

'Then we had better be on our way with all speed, towards the south where their alliances do not extend!' declared Lancelot. 'God curse me for listening to you, Saxon, when you made us buy these indolent camels instead of worthy stallions.'

Treguard drew his breath in deeply, leashing his anger. In the days spent travelling together, Lancelot had become no easier to get on with. Erica had often had to intervene between the two of them when they were at loggerheads. In part, no doubt, it was due to the strange world in which Lancelot found himself - so unlike his own time, when bold action was all that counted and every matter had the stark simplicity of legend. Treguard had tried to make allowances for that. But deep inside he also suspected a less palatable truth: that he and the younger knight were too alike, both accustomed to leadership. Neither liked deferring to the other.

Ghazi was more astute than his easy affability would at first suggest. Seeing the cold look the two knights gave each other, he spoke quickly to defuse the situation: 'Gracious lords, the camel is a hardy beast, with stamina to travel longer hours than any horse. Whatever aid our pursuers may have received from their Ayyubid allies thus far, we are now passing beyond the Ayyubid territories into Arabia. Those mounts will stand our pursuers in poor stead once we reach the desert region, and they will waste precious time searching for a settlement where they can exchange them for camels of their own.'

Lancelot held Treguard's glare a moment longer, then said, 'And if they find wild camels to ride?'

Ghazi spread his hands, beaming. 'My lord, there are no wild camels in the world.' Then he added, glancing down to where Erica was trying to goad her haughty camel to its feet: 'Nor any tame ones either, some do say!'

Both Treguard and Lancelot had to laugh at that. The tension dissolved, they scrambled back down in a shower of dust and pebbles to where Erica was waiting. As he mounted up, Lancelot said to Treguard, 'Pray accept an apology for my outburst, good comrade. I fear this blistering heat has put my temper out of sorts.'

'It will get much hotter than this,' said Treguard, spurring his own camel on with difficulty. The beast glowered balefully at him out of the corner of its eye before finally consenting to move.

'Lord Lancelot,' said Ghazi, 'this is true. In that armour you wear, the desert will bake you alive like a crab within its shell.'

Lancelot snorted. 'What do you suggest now: that I dispense with my armour, and our foes so close on our heels?'

Ghazi took this sarcasm with the same broad white smile with which he greeted everything else. 'My friend, you are pessimistic. We shall still be riding on into the evening when the Templars have long since had to stop to rest and water their horses. They'll find no fresh mounts from here on. In addition, I know this land with more familiarity than the hairs of my beard. You need not fear they'll overtake us.'

'I fear nothing!' proclaimed Lancelot. 'If I had a reliable warhorse under me, I'd wait here to battle them. They are only seven men.'

'Seven Knight Templars,' corrected Treguard. 'That is a different thing entirely. They are crafty, highly skilled, fearless and not averse to the use of magic. God knows that I am no coward, and I am accounted one of the strongest warriors of Christendom - but we could hardly fight atop these beasts' humped backs, as you say, and on foot we'd be cut down like dogs. Believe me, we are better off making all speed on our journey and hoping to outdistance them.'

Erica had been so deep in thought that she hardly seemed to hear what the others were saying. Sitting sidesaddle on her camel, she somehow managed to look as fresh as though she had just risen. 'What kind of magic?' she asked Treguard.

'Milady?'

The magic that you say the Templars use. What, for instance?'

Treguard was at a loss. 'Some folk claim that the Templars have made pacts with otherworldly forces,

preferring to deal with the evil side of the Christian faith rather than with the good side of the heathen. Others say simply that God rewards them for their devotion to Him by making them privy to certain mysteries. My own direct experience is limited to a prophecy I heard once from an old Templar on his deathbed. That prophecy turned out to be true in every detail. Other stories along the same lines are just hearsay, but I have no reason to doubt them. And if Rupert is after the Grail, you can be sure he'll have brought along the best wizard available to him.'

'What about the sprite?' suggested Erica, nodding at the glass bottle hanging beside Treguard, the bottle in which Pickle travelled. 'You could release him to go back and wreak some mischief amongst them.'

'Tickle?' Treguard laughed. 'His little repertoire of tricks would be well within the scope of any competent wizard. I'd prefer not to risk him, in all honesty.'

'Lord Treguard, for all your stern manner towards the sprite, I believe you are actually fond of him!'

'Ssh,' said Treguard with a wink. He was not absolutely sure that Pickle could not hear while confined in the bottle. 'He would be quite insufferable to command if he ever suspected anything of the sort.'

In the days that followed, they left the craggy hills behind and began to traverse the level and almost featureless landscape of northern Arabia. Where before there had been scattered groves of palms or cinnamon trees, whose fragrance was borne lightly on the wafting breeze, there was now just dust and

airless heat. Stretches of barren rock alternated with undulating tracts of ochre desert, and a fiery haze shimmered over the sun-scorched dunes.

In the matter of his armour Lancelot remained stubborn for a few days until, reeling under the hot sun, he was forced to cast it off. He rode on for half a day stripped to the waist, his muscular torso slick with sweat, proudly refusing the burnoose that Treguard offered him. By dusk that day he was raw and blistered, however, and finally he gave in and donned the robes of cool cotton.

Ghazi tried to cheer him with philosophy. 'We bedouins disdain the use of armour, friend Lancelot,' he said; 'for God has determined the hour of death for each and every man, and nothing we can do will bring that moment closer nor delay it for so much as a single heartbeat.'

'A preposterous doctrine!' scoffed Lancelot, wincing as the soft robes chafed his still-sore skin. 'In that case, try giving me your own ration of water each day. You would soon find the Lord God lost patience with you enough to reschedule the hour of your death, I fancy.'

As he spoke, to emphasize the point, Lancelot nodded towards a group of vultures, shuffling together under the branches of a bush that looked dry and dead. They looked like old men hunched inside dishevelled cloaks, sniggering silently over some misfortune. Seeing them, none of the travellers could avoid the qualm that they might end their journey as meat for those scavenger birds, their bones broken by the wind until they joined with the endless sands.

Ghazi alone did not take the sight of the vultures as

an ill omen. Urging his camel on with clicks of the tongue, he headed towards the bush. The birds dispersed reluctantly, climbing into the heavy air on ragged wings, croaking spitefully as they went. Treguard and the others rode up to find him crouching on his knees in the sand. He was rolling up a sheet of cloth and tying a length of string around it.

'Look here,' he said, pointing to a large flat rock beside the bush, 'it is a sign of God's providence. The plant's roots must have found water here, and so shall we.' Digging sand away from the rock with his hands, he uncovered a crack next to it that went down into the ground. He stuffed the cloth into this and lowered it on the string. When he pulled it up again, it was wet.

'Drink, drink!' cried Ghazi, wringing the cloth out over their cupped hands. 'And give thanks to God.'

After days of carefully rationed water - tart and warm from being long in their saddlebags - this cool draught tasted as sweet as drinking from the Holy Grail itself. They refreshed the camels and refilled their waterskins. Then Ghazi wrapped the damp cloth around his brow and stared into the white glare to the south.

More days passed, streaming by like the drifting sands, turning into weeks. The days were as hot as an oven under the sun's baleful stare, the nights grave-cold and filled with pitiless stars. Finding fresh supplies of water took all of Ghazi's ingenuity and often required them to detour far off their route. Not one of them failed to utter a prayer of thanks when, almost a month after leaving Acre, they spotted a splash of green in the dry wine-coloured haze of late afternoon. An oasis.

Lancelot dismounted and waded through the sand pulling his camel behind him. Under the luxuriant shade of the palm trees of the oasis they could now make out a low mud-brick wall enclosing a group of white tents. There were shouts as the inhabitants of the oasis spotted their approach. Lancelot twisted his sun-baked lips into a frown and flicked aside his robes to show the nomads his sword.

As the others followed him, Ghazi cautioned Erica to put up her hair and veil her face. 'The nomads do not think it right for a woman to go about boldly, displaying herself for all to see,' he told her.

Erica smiled indulgently at this and arranged a silky gauze to cover her nose and mouth. With just her eyes showing, mahogany-dark pools in a face as pale as porcelain, she looked more sweetly alluring than ever. Treguard fervently hoped that the nomads would not make an offer to buy her. Such peoples valued white-skinned Europeans as slaves, and could not understand that women were not property to be traded like camels. There could be trouble. He let his hand drop to the pommel of his sword and, aware of the imposing presence he commanded in his fine robes, rode into the oasis with the stern dignity of a desert chieftain.

Lancelot, of course, had already begun to find trouble of his own. Standing with one hand on his camel's harness and the other brandishing his sword, he was facing off against a group of half a dozen nomads who were trying to bar him from the water-hole. The nomads were too proud to back down, though they should have known from Lancelot's graceful stance and cool, unrelenting gaze that they were staring death in the face.

Treguard's camel knelt and he swung off its back, taking several measured paces forward until he stood directly in front of Lancelot. 'Let's avoid bloodshed if we can,' he said over his shoulder. 'Ghazi, tell them that we come in peace and wish only to refresh ourselves and our camels. Then we'll be on our way.'

The bedouin bobbed his head nervously and did as Treguard told him. Meanwhile, more nomads of the tribe emerged from their tents. They looked on sullenly from the flickering sunlight under the palm fronds. Each carried a scimitar. Imperious and warlike, the nomads had to wrest every moment of their lives from a desert that cared not a whit for their survival. As a result, they guarded their possessions with fierce jealousy. And it was clear they regarded the oasis as one such possession.

Several of the nomads were talking to Ghazi at once, and all seemed to be saying something different but with equal vehemence. Without waiting for them to finish speaking, he turned to Treguard. 'They say that they did not ask for you to come out of the desert, Lord Treguard, and they have not invited you to drink. Thus, they say, you should return now the way you came and not look for trouble in case you find it.'

'The curs!' cried Lancelot, spitting on the ground. 'No doubt they expect us to bargain for the water! Tell them I will send seven of their souls to hell for each second they stand in our way.'

Ghazi had no need to translate; it was obvious from the way Lancelot said this that he was issuing a threat. More of the tribesmen came forward, their naked blades glistening in the sun.

Treguard intervened before anger could boil over into violence. Raising his arms, he addressed the nomads in a loud voice as Ghazi translated. 'Remind them that God created the whole world and all men in it,' he proclaimed in a voice like thunder. 'And that the prophet Mahomet enjoined the rich not to withhold their treasures from the poor; and since we have wished them peace and asked permission, so we should not have to wait here thirsty at the edge of the oasis.'

Before Ghazi had even finished relaying this, Treguard added: 'Inform them that we are on a holy quest. Like the wise man al-Khidir who is told of in their faith, we seek the sacred chalice from which all life springs, the fount of God's bounty. Also tell them that I am Sheik Khab, a powerful lord, and that those who are my friends never need ask twice for any boon. Their enemies shall be my enemies.'

And lastly, again while Ghazi acted as interpreter, he said: 'Tell them that I do not wish to purchase water from them, because this oasis is God's gift and not to be bartered, but that I bring this gold as a token of the friendship I offer.' So saying, he took out the sack containing the money they had brought for the journey and opened it. Gold coins flowed into his hand, burning red in the sunset.

There was a long pause. Then one of the nomads stepped forward, sheathing his sword. The gold braid of his turban told Treguard that this was the tribe's chieftain. Coming right up to Treguard, he embraced him and led him towards his tent, calling for the women of the tribe to bring sherbet, figs and dates for his honoured guests. Ghazi hurried along behind, translating all the while. Lancelot warily

allowed others of the tribe to lead away the camels and then, taking care to stay close to Erica, he followed along. He returned his sword to its scabbard but kept his hand on it.

The interior of the tent was as welcoming as a cool grove in the height of summer. Gesturing to the plump cushions and brightly-coloured rugs, the chieftain waited until his guests had sat and then poured sherbet for them in copper goblets.

'Now that he has given us hospitality, we have nothing to fear,' Ghazi explained. He addressed this particularly to Lancelot who, instead of reclining on the cushions like the others, stayed in a crouch ready to spring up at the first sign of danger.

The chieftain watched them like a hawk. As they drank, he said something to Ghazi. The bedouin guide looked troubled.

'What is it?' Treguard asked him.

'Ah, my friend,' said Ghazi, heaving a deep sigh, 'he was telling me how much he admires that fine sword you wear.'

Treguard glanced down at his sword, Wyrmslayer, where it lay on the rug beside him. Its jewelled scabbard caught a low shaft of sunlight that penetrated the tent flap, sparkling magnificently. Wyrmslayer had been christened in dragon blood, and had indeed served him as a trusty friend in the ten years and more that had passed since that fateful day when Treguard slew his first monster of myth.

Treguard smiled back at the chieftain. Thank him for the compliment,' he said to Ghazi.

Ghazi shook his head sorrowfully. 'You do not understand, I'm afraid. By the nomads' code of honour, when a man says he admires something it is

proper to present it to him as a gift. Since you declared your friendship, you too are bound by this custom.'

Tell him you'll give him the sword, ail right - through his thieving black heart!' ventured Lancelot.

Treguard silenced him with a glance, then somehow mustered a warm smile as he faced the chieftain. He hated to part with Wyrmslayer. He would more readily have cut off his own left hand; but he had given his oath of friendship to these people, and as their guest he was bound by their laws. The code of Chivalry allowed no other course. Inwardly sick with grief, he lifted the sword and handed it to the nomad chief, who gazed at it rapaciously and then placed it on a low table behind him.

Someone came to say that their camels were watered and their waterskins refilled. Treguard rose to his feet feeling dazed and followed the others out into the dying sunlight. While they mounted up, the chieftain stood apart and conversed in a low voice with a rider who had just then come into the camp. After seeming to weigh something up in his mind, he came over and spoke to Ghazi.

'He asks if we have friends in these parts,' relayed the bedouin.

'Tell him we are surrounded by our friends,' Treguard pointedly replied at once, sweeping his hand around to take in all the nomads gathered to see them off.

The chieftain smiled, nodding in approval when this was translated for him. Ghazi listened as he spoke again.

'He says that this is true, but he was referring in this case to other Christians. One of his men has just

returned from a journey to Sulayyil, a depot town some three days to the east. He reports that there were strangers there.' Ghazi hesitated before translating the last part. 'Seven men whose white cloaks bore a red cross.'

'The Templars!' gasped Lancelot angrily. 'I had hoped we'd left their drying corpses in the desert far behind us.'

The chieftain says that if these men are our foes, he will see to it they are ambushed,' added Ghazi.

Treguard shook his head. 'It would cost too many lives. Thank him, but say that we will fight our own battles.' He looked straight into the chieftain's eyes and said: 'Go with God.'

The chieftain appeared to understand. He echoed Treguard's words with a similar sentiment in his own tongue. He and his warriors watched from the grove of palms as the small band rode out of the oasis and off into the spreading darkness between the dunes.

One of the tribesmen glanced at his chieftain. 'I wonder if they do indeed seek the spring of life, as their sheik claimed,' he mused.

The chief stroked his beard in contemplation. 'Something of the sort, I gather, in whatever form their infidel legends embody it. But their quest is surely doomed. Though God is compassionate and merciful, they cannot hope to traverse the Empty Quarter and reach the sea. The sands will be their tomb.'

He looked up again, but there was now no sign of the Christians. They had been swallowed up in the desert night, a light breeze already covering their tracks. If not for the sword the stranger had given

him, the chieftain could almost believe their visit never happened.

'Like a mirage vanishing without trace,' he said to himself. 'Or like waking, and trying in vain to hold on to a dream.'

CHAPTER FOUR

. . . A howl as though the sky itself is screaming. The moon curdles red, blood-clotted, and then is swept across by towers of cloud closing like shutters upon the stars. The storm hits with the force of a battering ram: the fist of a giant levelling the whole world in his fury. Even the grains of sand flee before his wrath, shards of glass spitting like hornets, and black Night drops low to swoop over the dunes in the form of a gigantic crow. Its charnel pinions slice the air, whipping up the storm-tossed sand. To stare into the teeth of the gale is impossible. It is like the laugh of the Furies, the face of the Gorgon, the sere breath of Hades. Nothing can stand before its juggernaut tread, this snarling desert storm that abhors the least trace of life. It is as though Satan himself had leaned close to blow his foul breath upon the earth.

Tiny figures against the illimitable sands: white-cloaked, slashes of red shaping a cross on their breasts. They see the storm of Night approach, the wings of the murderous crow that stretch from horizon to horizon. Its beak is open to engulf them, those tiny frightened specks under the thundering black bowl of the sky. Their eyes, frozen open by fear, drink in the sight of oblivion.

They fall in prayer, words whipped away by the storm. But the pleas of the devout are never lost. Lo - in the east - a figure of scintillant glory, a Titan whose white wings hold up the sky! It is an angel, sword of

bright white fire flashing in its hands, serene face set against the screaming crow. The bird claws at the air, croaking defiance, but the angel stands firm against the storm and brings its sword down. It cleaves the shrieking wind. Blood bursts amid black feathers. The shroud of sand is ripped apart - Night goes shivering back westwards to hide under the rim of the world. The angel stands triumphant over the tiny white knights, so resplendent with God's glory that it too is agony to behold.

It opens its mouth to speak. Attend its words—! ...

Treguard! Treguard! Wake up!

Treguard prised his eyes open with difficulty and yawned. He was soaked in sweat. 'Merciful heaven, it was just a dream . . . '

Lancelot was looking down at him. 'It's morning,' he said. 'There was a sandstorm during the night, but it seems to have blown over now.'

Treguard sat up and winced. Normally he came instantly awake, but at the moment he felt muzzy with weariness. His head throbbed painfully and his mouth was dry. In the east, bloodstained clouds were parting to reveal the searing white orb of the sun. He looked around. 'Where's Erica?' he said suddenly.

Lancelot tilted his head. 'Just over there a little way. No need for alarm. You overslept, that's all.'

Treguard looked over and saw Erica packing some articles into her saddlebag. For an instant he fancied he could detect a strange brimstone reek on the air, but then a breeze dispersed it. Nearby, Ghazi had been woken by their voices. He stared about, blinking in the early daylight, amazed to find that for once the sun had risen before he did. Treguard saw the bedouin press a hand to his head as he got unsteadily to his feet.

As Lancelot went over to speak to Erica, Ghazi said, 'Tell me, Lord Treguard - how do you feel this morning?'

'Not as well as I might.' He shook his head, trying to clear the veil of fatigue. He felt as though he had been drugged - but it had been days since they had left the nomads' oasis, and they had been safely drinking the same water all that time.

Ghazi studied him, perhaps thinking the same thing. He was on the point of saying something when Lancelot returned across the sand with Erica at his side.

If there was a taint in the water, it had not affected Erica. She gave him her usual radiant smile, beside which the dawn seemed a poor sight indeed. 'Did you sleep all through that terrible sandstorm?' she asked.

'It must have been quite a nightmare,' said Lancelot. 'You seem quite shaken.'

Treguard frowned. 'If nightmare it was.' He took up the blue glass bottle and unstoppered it. Peering inside, he called irritably, 'Come on, Pickle; appear, manifest - show yourself!'

'No need to exert yourself, master,' said a calm voice from behind him; 'I heard you the first time. My goodness . . .' The sprite pranced close and looked intently at him. 'Did you have a bad night, master?'

'Pickle!' Treguard rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to banish his headache by mere force of will. 'Listen carefully. You are to make yourself invisible and flit across the sand east and north of here until you come upon another party: Rupert of Armitage and his fellows. Observe them and report - but,

Pickle, have a care. They may have a sorcerer amongst them.'

Pickle nodded, stretching his slender limbs. 'It will be good to roam free a while after so long spent cramped up in that jar,' he murmured to himself. Then, addressing himself to Treguard, he said: 'Til travel like a cat's shadow, master. You can rely on your devoted Pickle - I'll be back before your heart beats twice.'

With that, he sped away across the sand and vanished. Only then did the others notice that he left no footprints, nor cast a shadow as they did.

Soon after they had begun to pack their belongings back on to the camels, Pickle came flickering back out of the sunrise. 'It's done, master,' he reported.

Treguard grunted in satisfaction as he checked the buckles of his saddlebag. 'And?'

'There are seven of them, less than a dozen leagues away, and I found them sorely dishevelled and filthy with dust. If there was a sandstorm in the night, they bore the brunt of it.'

'And was there, Pickle, a sorcerer with them?'

'There was, master - or, at any rate, a ginger-haired scholar whose apparel certainly marked him as such. I think he had recently performed some great feat of magic, in fact. He was so exhausted from his spell that he failed to sense my presence.'

'A spell . . .' said Erica, hearing all this. 'Could he have summoned the storm, do you think?'

'If he did,' said Treguard, 'then it seems to have backfired on him. From what Pickle says, the Templars have been more discommoded by it than we have.'

Lancelot swung up on to his camel and, disregarding

its grumpy snorts, prodded it to its feet. 'Let's not delay, then. Since luck has given us an advantage, we should seize it. Here is our chance to lose them altogether.'

They resumed their journey, eating a light breakfast of vine-wrapped rice as they rode.

Treguard brought up the rear, allowing Pickle to flit alongside for the time being. *But was it lucky?* he asked himself. *I wonder . . .*

Harsh as their journey had been so far, in the Empty Quarter it became much worse. So called because no-one - not even the hardy nomad tribesmen - could live there, the Empty Quarter was a dreadful barren wasteland where the sand dunes rose hundreds of feet on either side. Treguard and his companions took to travelling mostly by night, relying on the moonlight and the sharp-sighted camels to guide them. Each dawn just brought waves of suffocating heat up from the sand like an open kiln.

They rode in the deep trenches between the dunes - partly to benefit from the shadows cast by those massive hills of sand, partly because it was only here that there was any chance of finding water. Often they had to scabble at the roots of a lonely leafless saltbush to steal the little precious water that its roots had managed to find.

On their third day in the desert, while levering up a rock in search of moisture, Lancelot was stung by a scorpion. The others looked on amazed as he calmly sliced the wound with his dagger to make the blood flow, and then went on with the business of collecting a little water. Apart from complaining of dizziness for a few hours, he was otherwise

unaffected. Ghazi later told Treguard that the scorpion sting would have paralysed an ordinary man, or even killed him outright.

Erica, despite her apparent frailty, coped better than any of them. She always sat sprightly on her camel's back, smiling tranquilly, black robes swaying gently about her slim body. The scorching heat failed to burn her, and never brought more than a film of perspiration to her brow.

Eight days out from the oasis, grey gravel began to replace the sand underfoot. Plants became more common - not just shrubs, but also acacia trees and grass. As they rode south, they caught sight of wildlife.

'I had begun to think there was no life left in the world,' said Lancelot through sun-baked lips, pointing to a fox slinking through the bushes. They followed it to a waterhole whose contents, though dirty and brackish, they drank down as though it were nectar.

Before long they rode through light woodland, delighted as much by the sight of greenery as by a heady aroma that hung under the branches. Most of the trees were high swaying palms, but the aromatic ones were distinctive in having no central trunk; the branches grew up in a cluster out of the earth. Dismounting, Ghazi drew his knife and cut at the bark of one of these trees. Fragrant resin dripped to the ground, and he told them that this was how frankincense was gathered. Hearing this, Erica insisted on collecting some of the resin in a small gold locket. Two of the gifts of the Magi,' she explained, holding up the locket. 'If we can find myrrh also, I shall count it a good omen of success in the quest.'

They came upon a goatherd grazing his animals on the yellow-green grass of the low hills. He stared at them as though they were genies emerging out of the northern wilderness. It was only then that it occurred to Treguard how frightening their appearance must have seemed to him - grimy, pale skins reddened by the sun, hair and beards long and unkempt and thick with dust. He resolved that if this southern land had bath-houses as the Saracens did, a visit there would be his first priority.

Following directions pointed out by the nervous goatherd, they rode on until they reached cultivated groves of date palms. Along the route lay many small villages, the suburbs of the great port city of Dhofar. People came out from their mud-brick dwellings to stare in a mixture of wonder and fear. Chickens ran about clucking in panic, skidding perilously under the camels' feet in their haste to get out of the way. Erica smiled at the sight of white doves perched in the lush foliage beside the road and, when she reached up, one of the birds flew down to settle briefly on her hand. At this, the villagers gave a startled cry and fled back to the safety of their houses.

'They think you are a sorceress, lady,' said Ghazi with a grin.

Erica smiled, saying nothing, and let the dove fly back up to the trees.

In contrast to the dry desolation of the desert, the air in these parts was humid and heavy. Lancelot pushed back the hood of his burnoose and swept his sweat-matted hair out of his eyes. 'In God's name,' he said, 'first we are baked by the desert, then boiled alive in this drenching heat! I would give a year of my

life to be caught in a freezing downpour in Britain right now!'

Having been absent from his homeland for many years, Treguard found himself in complete agreement with this. It felt strange to suddenly discover a point of empathy between him and the Round Table knight, who so often had struck Treguard as almost a creature of an alien world. Now that Lancelot's words conjured up an image of drab wet English skies, he realized that they were countrymen after all - even though separated in time by seven centuries. Such a span of years counted for little against the deep antiquity of England. He looked across at Lancelot and Erica and saw they were thinking the same thing. After their long ordeal, they felt a sudden rush of sheer relief. The three of them laughed loudly at Lancelot's remark, while Ghazi looked on and wondered if all Englishmen were indeed mad, as he had heard.

In Dhofar they were presented with a new problem. Treguard had been forced to use all their gold to buy the desert tribesmen's friendship, leaving them penniless. They were able to sell their camels in the market, but at a significant loss since these animals were common in the region. After a visit to a bath-house, a change of clothes, and securing a room at an inn, they were left with just a handful of coins.

'Thirty silver pieces,' announced Treguard, counting them out in the common room of the inn. 'Not enough to buy us a ship, my friends - even if we knew where to go from here.'

There are many very wise and learned men in these coastal provinces,' said Ghazi as he savoured

his first cup of coffee in almost two months, 'for the Arabs are an ancient race, and widely travelled. We should seek a sage to advise us.'

Lancelot was glowering into his own coffee-cup. He had not taken it well when informed that, this being a country devoted to Islam, there was no wine to be had. 'What's this written around the rim of the cup?' he said sullenly, pointing to the decorative border of Arabic calligraphy.

'Cups and plates are often decorated with a line of verse,' explained Ghazi. 'Let me see ... this one reads: "Perched on the wall I saw a dove which asked me, cooing, "Whither goest thou?"'"

Erica gave a peal of delighted laughter. 'That's the dove that settled on my hand when we were on the road south!' she cried. 'Remember? It's as if it were some form of divination - you've heard of those scholars who claim to tell the future by picking verses at random from the Bible.' She handed her cup to Ghazi.

He was sceptical but, like any other man, he found her whims irresistible. 'It refers to *Zamzam*, which is the sacred well at Mecca,' he told her, raising his eyebrows.

'Surely that corresponds to the Holy Grail in Christian myth!' she cried.

'It would seem so . . .' Ghazi looked at his own cup and read: '""The ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr." It is one of the sayings of the Prophet.'

'What is your interpretation of that, milady?' Treguard asked Erica.

'It seems to support Ghazi's suggestion that we should consult a sage. Now, what of your own

cup . . . ?' But as she took it out of Treguard's hand it slipped and fell, shattering on the stone floor.

'I prefer to live in the present rather than worrying about the future,' said Treguard philosophically. As the inn-keeper rushed over to clear away the broken cup, Treguard caught his sleeve and put one of the remaining silver coins into his hand. 'Ghazi, ask him if he can recommend a learned man who could advise us.'

The inn-keeper looked significantly at the purse as he replied. He beamed happily when Treguard took the hint and dropped another coin beside the first.

'He says that Zaman al-Hazred is the wisest man in Dhofar.' Ghazi paused as the inn-keeper added an afterthought. ' . . . In fact, our friend here believes he is the wisest man to be born since the days of the Prophet! Allowing for the local tendency towards exaggeration, he does seem to be the sort of man we want.'

After getting directions, they set out for the scholar's house. Dhofar was a much cleaner city than any in the Holy Land. Its wide avenues were lined with palm trees, and sparkling marble fountains played in the sunlight. This time they drew no stares from the townsfolk. Unlike the villagers of the rural suburbs, the people of Dhofar were accustomed to travellers from all over the known world. In point of fact, it was now the turn of Treguard and his companions to goggle in wonder as they passed a group of silk-robed merchants from Cathay whose skin was the colour of saffron, all talking at once in a language that sounded like the ringing of tiny bells. When they realized they were the object of

open scrutiny, the merchants smiled indulgently and, raising their clasped hands in an odd gesture of salutation, turned off the thoroughfare into an inn.

'Extraordinary,' breathed Erica. 'I had not appreciated a tenth of the wonders that the world has to offer. So many diverse peoples, of different cultures and faiths . . . Goddess, what I might learn from them!'

'You mean those yellow-skinned foreigners?' Lancelot grunted, overhearing her. 'Interesting swords they were carrying, I thought.'

Following a promenade of rose-coloured marble that ran along the seafront, they gazed out to the south over an azure harbour where ships of all kinds bobbed at anchor, their sails furled and wafting languidly in the warm wind. Beyond lay the gleaming harbour walls, surmounted by two great towers with lighthouses atop them. Through the harbour mouth they could see, blazing in the sunlight, an ocean even vaster than the desert they had crossed. Sea-birds wheeled overhead, their sharp cries echoing on the salt-tinged breeze.

They soon reached the house the inn-keeper had directed them to. It was recognizable by the cedar-wood panel over the courtyard entrance, on which some lines from the Koran were written in gold: *Allah alone has knowledge of all things.*

A servant met them at the door and escorted them through the dappled shade under an arbour of baobab trees, across the garden, and up a flight of marble steps to a balcony overlooking the courtyard. A portly man in fine brocade robes sat there on a heap of satin cushions, quill-pen poised in hand,

surrounded by scrolls. Seeing them approach he heaved his bulk up to greet them and, once the introductions had been made, ordered his servant to bring sweetmeats.

Zaman listened as Treguard explained their quest; a fluent grasp of Latin was among the least of his accomplishments. He nodded occasionally at a point of particular interest and sometimes jotted a note on a sheet of paper lying on the writing-table by his elbow. When Treguard finished, the sage sat back with a thoughtful sigh and folded his stubby fingers across his belly.

'Of course I have heard the stories of the Grail,' said Zaman. 'It is said to restore vigour to those who drink from it, and to fill itself continually so that it is never empty. By one account, it was carved from a ruby that God had given to His favourite angel and which He took back after the war in Heaven. This jewelled cup, finding its way to Earth, was the chalice from which Jesus drank before his arrest by the Romans, and was the receptacle into which three drops of his blood fell while he hung on the cross. Thereafter, it was taken by Joseph of Arimitha when he went into exile, and by that route it found its way to your homeland.'

'This much is common knowledge!' Lancelot blustered, glaring around at his companions. 'Any kitchen-maid of Camelot is as learned as this fat charlatan.'

Zaman winced and averted his eyes, embarrassed. Treguard regarded Lancelot icily and said to him, 'Conduct yourself with at least a modicum of civility or by Christ I shall forget we're comrades! This good gentleman has offered us his hospitality and his time,

and the benefit of his wise words. Has the code of Chivalry changed so much since your day, that the simple courtesies of this modern age are alien to you?'

Erica looked at Zaman and implored him to forgive Lancelot's remarks. 'He is from a time long passed, and unused to civilized company.'

'Unused to the company of heathens and fools . . .' muttered Lancelot to himself, but he said nothing more.

Zaman waved the incident away as forgotten. 'The sea of wisdom is fed by the rivers of the familiar,' he said placidly. 'Now, of the Grail's history in Britain, I imagine you are better informed than I. It was returned to Jerusalem by the Christian knight Bleoberis, who established a chapel for it there.'

'This much, too, tallies with what we know,' said Erica. 'But what became of it then?'

It remained in Jerusalem for sixty years and more, until news of it reached the ears of an evil Magian sorcerer called Melapharos. From his island in the Arabian Sea, he sent forth a winged demon to fetch him the Grail. This loathly creature might have accomplished its task without hindrance, for in the space of a single night it had flown halfway across the world, and even while the evocatory candles still burned in Melapharos' tower his dark agent stole into the chapel. Dawn was yet an hour off and the chapel should have been deserted, but by chance a great hero of those days, Prince Rashad, had just then arrived in Jerusalem and desired to view the Grail.

'As he bowed in veneration at the altar, Rashad heard a sound like the scrape of stone on stone, but

he was a clever man as well as a brave one and he did not jump up at once. Instead he spoke as though in prayer, saying, "Forgive me, O Lord, for I have been long on the road and my stomach grumbles with hunger." And as he said this, he pushed the robes back covering his sword.

The jinni, which had removed one of the blocks from the chapel wall in order to gain entry, overheard this and thought Rashad was deep in prayer. It tried to reach in and snatch the Grail, but the distance was just too far for its lank limbs. So it removed another of the stone blocks, again with a sound as before, and this time Rashad said, "O Lord, forgive me for these signs of weakness, for what is the ache of mere hunger compared to the awful knowledge of Man's sins?" And this time he loosened his sword in its scabbard.

Behind Rashad's back the jinni grinned to itself, thinking him a foolish man, and again tried to stretch out its arm for the Grail. It reached right over Rashad's head as he bowed, but still the gap was too small for it to squeeze far enough in. By now it had decided that its only course was to remove a third block, enter the chapel bodily, and fall upon Rashad unawares. As the scraping sound echoed in the hush of the deserted chapel, Rashad spoke a third time: "My belly cries out, O Lord, for it knows not that earthly nourishment cannot compare to the sustenance of faith!" And so saying he drew his sword and, spinning round to face the jinni as it entered, cast his cape over its head.

The battle raged back and forth, since Rashad had the strength and courage of a lion and he was not to be bested by any foul creature of sorcery. Many in

the city woke, hearing the sound of the struggle, and thought that the end of the world had come. The ground shook and the sky trembled, and the chapel of the Grail fell in ruins, but still they fought.

'Rashad held the creature almost until dawn, knowing that it would depart with the break of day, but then it loosed itself from under his cloak and saw what he planned. Seizing the Grail, it swung its great wings and rose up through the broken roof. But Rashad was not a man to allow any foe to escape his wrath, and fear was a stranger to him, so he leaped upon the jinni's back and continued to smite at it with his sword.

Filled with pain and panic, the jinni fled back into the south where its master waited. Try as it might it could not shake off the hero who clung to it, hurting it with strong blows and heedless of his own peril if it should fall. It passed above the Dead Sea and the mountains. Giving Mecca a wide berth, it flew over the dunes of the desert and through these very skies under which we now sit. Still it pressed south, out over the ocean, its cries raising a storm which crashed around Rashad's head. Cold rain and black blood filled his eyes, and his arm shook with fatigue, but still he struck at the jinni until, lashing back blindly at him, it knocked the sword from his grip.

The hero hardly paused or strayed his hand at the loss. Instead, as his sword dropped down through the storm, he encircled the jinni's neck with his magnificent beard and choked the unnatural life from its carcass. It fluttered down like a dead leaf, alighting on the shore of Melapharos' isle, and there the sorcerer waited to confront Rashad. The tales of their battle are many, but in truth the only witnesses

were the sky, the sea and the sand. Nothing is known of their fate. However, the Grail never returned to the lands of men. It remains on the island to this day.'

'Are there charts which show the location of this island?' Erica asked excitedly.

Zaman nodded, his several chins wobbling like blancmange. 'Oh yes, indeed. In ancient times it was a place that every mariner was keen to avoid, you see. I shall provide you with a copy.'

'And what payment will you ask in return, I wonder?' said Lancelot, ever suspicious.

'Nothing at all,' replied Zaman. 'I am only happy that I was able to be of service. What is the good of knowledge, after all, if it cannot be applied to helping others?'

'And we are grateful for your help,' said Treguard. 'Unfortunately our quest is beset by a further obstacle which I suspect my young companions here have forgotten.'

'And that is . . . ?'

'The familiar complaint. We have no money.'

'Ah.' Zaman shook his head. 'That is unfortunate. Yours would not be the first worthy venture to falter through lack of funds. But be of good cheer: God is all-knowing and bountiful!'

'We could steal a boat . . .' said Lancelot, thinking out loud.

'And deprive some poor fisherman of his livelihood?' snapped Treguard.

Lancelot looked amazed. 'We are on a holy quest! Surely that should take precedence over anything else?'

'We will never attain anything if we begin by

abandoning our principles.' Treguard was on the verge of saying more, but he decided to let it pass. Over the weeks they had travelled together he had gained more insights into Lancelot's nature than he wanted. It was bitter to realize that the cherished Round Table myths were rooted in such a disappointing reality.

Erica had sat through all this lost in her private thoughts. With a resigned and wistful sigh, she reached into the bosom of her robes and brought out a gold ring set with a clear violet stone that glittered in the sun.

'Mother—' cried Lancelot.

Erica looked at him.

'Mother of God, Erica, such a heirloom must be worth a king's ransom! You cannot mean to part with it . . .'

'Worth a noble knight's ransom, anyway,' she murmured, smiling secretly as she gazed at the ring. 'But what use is wealth if sequestered away?'

'May I . . . ?' Zaman took the ring from her and studied it, ignoring the distrustful frown Lancelot turned on him. 'Indeed, this is a treasure almost beyond price, dear lady! Has it been in your family long, may I ask?'

'It was the gift of a good friend who was like a sister to me,' said Erica, taking the ring back. 'She is dead now. And though it grieves me, selling the ring is the only way we will be able to continue our quest.'

'I doubt if there is anyone in all Dhofar who could give you a tenth of its true value,' Zaman warned her.

Once she had made a decision, Erica could not be deterred. 'As long as we get the price of a ship, it

will suffice. Therefore let me ask you to give us the benefit of your counsel, friend Zaman, to recommend a reputable jewel-merchant.'

She took a last look at the ring and then pushed it away from her into Treguard's hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pole star twinkled back at Treguard through the slit in the wooden tablet he was holding to the sky. He glanced at the edge of the tablet and noted the star's height above the horizon, comparing this with the entry on the charts. Satisfied, he lowered the device and made a note in the ship's log.

Lancelot, who was not literate and had no patience for science, shook his head in bafflement. 'What is that supposed to tell you?' he asked.

Treguard grinned and sucked the sharp briny air into his lungs. Ever since his mercenary days, he had revelled in the seafarer's life. This ingenious device, lad,' he boomed, brandishing the wooden block with its short length of string, 'has been used for hundreds of years by the Arabs to help them navigate across these very seas. Now it tells me we're dead on course for our destination.'

It was a warm night, and they were all grateful for the breeze blowing across the ship's deck. The sky looked larger and more full of stars than any of them could remember seeing it before. The gentle lap of the waves against the side, and the creaking of the hull as it shifted in sympathy with the ocean, made a soothing lullaby. It was almost enough to make them forget the perils that still lay ahead: the spellbound isle - doubtless demon-haunted still, and steeped in

dangers both natural and uncanny - and the wizard's lair where the Grail had lain undisturbed for six centuries.

Their vessel was of a type known as a balam. Virtually identical to those that had plied these waters in ancient times, it was constructed not of nailed planks, but by lacing sections of hardened ox-hide together with coconut-twine. The delighted fellow who had exchanged the ship for Erica's ring told them this was because of a mysterious magnet somewhere deep on the sea bed, which would pull the nails out of a Western-style ship. None of them but Treguard had ever seen a magnet, but after some early reservations they were satisfied that the ship was sturdy enough.

Before setting out, Erica had insisted the ship have a name. They settled on calling her the *Incunabula* and, recalling the words that King Solomon placed on the ship he built for his descendants, Treguard added the legend: *Whoever sets out in me, be sure to be steadfast, for I am nothing but Faith itself, and if thou fail I shall not help thee.* Lancelot had been unimpressed when this was read out to him, insisting that such a doomy sentiment did not bode well for the voyage. When Treguard pointed out that Solomon was nowadays thought to be Lancelot's own ancestor, the knight fell into a brooding reverie and left him to his work.

'Steady as she goes,' Treguard called back to Ghazi, who was manning the tiller.

The bedouin grinned back merrily. At first he had taken badly to sailing, for all that Treguard claimed it was just like swaying to and fro on the back of a camel. They were two days out of Dhofar before he

could keep down even the smallest morsel of food. Once he had found his sea legs, however, Ghazi took to it like an old salt. He appointed himself the helmsman; tiller lines in hand, he squatted on the gunnel and steered the ship with the same skill he rode his camels. 'Now I know why they call camels "the ships of the desert"!' he said.

Erica had her mind on other matters. Sitting with the composure of a dove on the rail, she gazed out astern. The moon was just rising, a sharp scimitar of silver on the eastern horizon, its blue light skimming nacreously over the water.

'I wonder if the Templars are still behind us,' she said.

Treguard narrowed his eyes and peered into the distance. 'Not that I can tell. Did you see anything, lady Erica?'

She shook her head and, shivering, pulled her robe tighter around her shoulders. The wind was not cold. 'Just a sensation . . .' she said. 'You know, like someone treading on your grave.'

Treguard yelled up into the rigging: 'Mister Pickle -you're on lookout!'

Atop the wide triangular sail, which was stretched against the sky as though pinned at its corners, sat the sprite. He appeared as though weightless, his hands leaving no impression where they held on to the canvas.

'I thought I was cabin-boy, master,' he called back.

'You'll be keelhauled if you don't shake a leg, Pickle! You're an airy sprite - if you can't see anything when you go aloft, then *keep going*.'

Pickle let go of the sail and shot straight up into the

air, rising up and up until he was just another star among the countless constellations. Then he came flashing down again, to land on the deck beside Treguard without so much sound as a feather makes in falling.

'They're on our tail, master. But they're ten leagues or more to the north, and somewhat east of our position.'

Treguard slammed his meaty fist into his palm. 'By Saint Christopher, that Rupert is like a dog with its teeth on a rope! How has he managed to stick so close all this way?'

'Of course!' Erica gave a sudden gasp, then recovered herself. 'His sorcerer will have dowsing, won't he. He's been tracking us every step of the journey.' She fingered her hand and muttered to herself, 'If only I still had my ring . . .'

Only Pickle overheard her. 'Don't worry, ma'am,' he said, letting his hand flutter above her shoulder. 'You couldn't have known it'd be better exchanged for a warship.'

'Did you say *warship*?' shouted Treguard. 'Don't be absurd, you aerial elf- how could just the five of us man a warship? You wouldn't have the puff to help us on our way if our vessel were that big. Speaking of which . . .' He pointed up at the sail.

Pickle jumped nimbly to windward and, striking a pose with one hand on the halyard, blew hard into the billowing expanse of canvas. The *Incunabula* lurched with a sudden burst of extra speed, her bows slicing up a tawny-curdled froth from the dark swelling water. He kept this up until, cheeks almost bursting with the strain, he sank down on the deck exhausted.

'A Trojan effort, my trusty Aeolus!' said Treguard. He went forward to stand in the bows, hands clasped behind his back and feet planted strongly astride the deck. With his cloak snapping about him in the gale Pickle had whistled up, he looked every inch the proud sea-captain.

'But my name's Pickle . . .' the sprite managed to gasp out before slinking back down in a curl of lambent smoke to rest inside his bottle.

'We'll surely leave them standing now,' Ghazi declared in a confident voice.

'Unless they've got a spell for fair winds, as well,' pointed out Lancelot. 'We ought to risk the pixie in reconnaissance - we might find out what their wizard is capable of. Forewarned is forearmed, Merlin always used to say.'

'That advice sounds too straightforward for Merlin,' said Treguard with a snort of laughter. 'Since none of us has any real knowledge of sorcery, knowing what the Templar wizard is capable of would avail us little. In any case, Pickle is a valued member of the ship's complement even if he had not just worn himself out with conjury.'

'Why, thank you, master,' said a voice from the bottle.

Erica picked it up and replaced the stopper. Treguard, seeing this as he glanced back, nodded in thanks. Sometimes it was useful to have a way of shutting off the wily imp's chatter.

'What about these creatures called jinn?' she said, rolling the bottle around in her hands as she spoke. 'The prince in the sage's story killed one, but there might be others on Melapharos' island. What is known of them?'

Ghazi had the best answer, culled from the folktales of many generations. 'They are beings of smokeless fire, my lady, who inhabit ruins, wildernesses and graveyards. They can appear as deluding images in the desert - or as lights that lead sailors off course to their doom.'

'Ah,' said Erica. 'Like a will-o'-the-wisp.'

Ghazi shrugged. 'Creatures of sorcery all vary, but are alike in their perfidy. Jinn have red hair and green eyes when they take on human form. At other times, they may take the shape of whirlwinds, or strike with swords of lightning from the sky. It depends on the individual jinni.'

'Unfortunately, the rich tapestry of folklore gives us nothing definite to go on,' said Treguard. 'Though there may be jinn on the island, we must face that danger if and when it comes. For now, we'd better get some sleep. Lancelot - you take the first watch.'

The air is deep and heavy, the storm-scent strong. Hanging wetly, a canvas shroud flutters overhead; the deck rattles under lancing jets of cold rain. Stretching out further than the eye can see, the ocean churns and heaves, its motion as inexorable and slow as the snoring of a giant.

Lightning drops in molten gobbets from a sky that is nothing but rain and vaults of black cloud. The thunder growls, a clattering echo under the eaves of Heaven.

A figure is standing in the bows of the ship, back arched exultantly as rain lashes its robes. Its hands are raised in a posture of invocation, and strange words are whipped from its mouth by the wind.

The sea stirs. Out of its gelid bowels, something is

rising, awakened by the occult prayer. Spikes of ice break the surf. Water rises in a vast sheet from the sea, up and up, dwarfing the little boat that is now but a toy. Ahead looms a sheer cliff-face - not of rock but of water, hanging impossibly against the sky. A gaping maw drops open and, high up, two gulfs like malignant eyes blaze with storm-light. Then it speaks, this ancient sentinel of the sea. Its voice sounds like the pulse of lifeblood, rumbling deeply in the distance as if from another world - the waking world. This is a dream.

Treguard can see the giant face clearly even though he knows that in the dream his eyes are still closed. He tries to cry out, but his stifled sob is lost in the overpowering storm. A weight on his chest will not allow him to rise. His fingers are stiff with cold, and in any case he no longer has a sword. How did he lose it? He cannot remember . . . Was it on a quest?

The figure in the bows half turns. It is a woman, proud and vital, a sneer of cold command stamped on features of inhuman beauty. The wind tosses her hair about her like a cloak of blackest silk. She drifts closer, pale feet hardly touching the deck, and leans close as though to plant a kiss on Treguard's brow. She is saying something, her words rolling ponderously through the clammy air. She is telling Treguard to rest while the Undine does its work.

Behind her, the giant's watery visage seems to grin, then plunges down again into the depths. It leaves a deep furrow in the waves as it surges northwards to do the witch's bidding. It has gone to wreak havoc on his enemies, Treguard knows; it has gone to shred their sails and smash their ship to kindling. He should revel in their undoing, those rank villains hiding in their smocks of sanctity. He should rejoice as the Undine hammers them

with its watery fists and sucks them to the sea-bed in its maelstrom jaws. But he cannot. This is evil sorcery; no matter how wicked his foes may be, they do not deserve such a dreadful doom.

'No!' Treguard cries, pushing the pale woman away. Though rigid as death and mortally tired, he starts to rise.

The woman, stripped of her ethereal poise, falls back to sprawl on the wet creaking planks. She screams at Treguard, enraged and frightened. He has broken her spell! Now they too are in peril from the Undine!

The ship lurches, caught by a high wave. There is a snap as the spine of the mast breaks, flinging the sail out across the waves like a shrivelled wing. Treguard is still half submerged in dream. He struggles to open his eyes, and it is like swimming through thick blood towards a haze of light. His heartbeat thunders in his ears; his breath shrieks louder than the wind—

He opens his eyes, wide awake at last.

Nothing has changed. The dream was real—!

Before Treguard had time to alert the others, five great towers of solid water rose around the ship - the fingers of the Undine's fist. He bellowed a warning, but it was too late. The fingers closed, crushing their fragile vessel. Treguard was flung overboard and caught the rail. Strands of torn rigging snagged him like a web. With his face half under the water, he was amazed to find himself staring at something that floated, glittering, just beneath the waves. It was a sharp crescent of silver - the moon's reflection, he would have thought, if not for the storm-clouds covering the sky. The thought suddenly came to him that it was like some shard of dream that he had dredged up from the depths with him when he forced himself awake. The sudden calm he felt, in the midst

of the panic and confusion, was like being in the eye of a storm.

He reached down for the shining object. He felt his hands close on the hilt of a sword.

Then the ship lurched again, a spar of broken timber caught Treguard on the temple, and he fell into a deeper oblivion than sleep.

'Ptah! I thought for a moment I was back in the desert . . .'

Treguard sat up, spitting sand, and looked along the shore. It was day. He was on a narrow strand of white beach backed by low pearl-grey cliffs. Atop the cliffs, and spreading right back into the interior of the island, was a thick tangle of verdant jungle. Gulls drifted lazily in an azure sky.

A shadow fell across Treguard where he lay sprawled on the sand. Instantly he whirled, bringing his feet under him and raising his sword—

The sword. He stared at it as Lancelot knelt beside him.

'Where did you come by that?' asked the burly young knight.

'It's the one the sage told us about - the one Prince Rashad dropped into the sea of myth,' said Treguard, certain of this but unsure quite where his conviction stemmed from. 'I plucked it out of a dream.'

'Handy,' said Lancelot. He rose as Erica came over to them. Like their own clothing, her robes were ragged and soaked in brine. Somehow she still contrived to seem fair as an unplucked flower. Treguard got to his feet, brushing away the caked sand and arranging what remained of his clothes for the sake of modesty.

'What happened?' said Erica. 'I think a storm hit us.'

Treguard nodded. 'I saw a jinni in the shape of a witch standing at the prow. She conjured up the Undine - a sea demon - but lost control of it.'

'I didn't see any witch, nor demon,' said Lancelot. 'The wave that hit us was as high as yonder cliffs. I thought you must have hit your head, since you looked to be out cold when we went down. Perhaps what you saw was just a dream?'

'It was a dream,' the Lord of Nightmare agreed. 'But *not just* a dream.'

Suddenly Erica pointed along the beach, a gasp of alarm catching in her throat: 'Look.'

Treguard was racing along the white sand almost before his mind had time to take in what he saw. Lying there in the shadow of a palm tree, trussed in snagged lengths of rigging, was a motionless form - Ghazi.

Treguard skidded to a halt and rolled the bedouin over on to his back. He could tell at once that the man was dead from the way his arm flopped across like a limp fish. The face was grey, eyes frosted over and staring blindly up at the sun. The ready roguish grin had gone for ever, replaced by an expression of fathomless horror.

Treguard groaned and sat back on the sand. 'Poor Ghazi, faithful companion!' he lamented. 'This was not even his quest.'

'He was well paid for his trouble,' said Lancelot casually. 'Now, let's explore this island.'

It was only out of respect for the dead that Treguard did not get up at once and hit him. With difficulty he kept control of his temper enough to

say: 'First we shall bury Ghazi at the foot of the cliffs, and command his soul to Heaven with a prayer.'

Lancelot glowered at him. He disliked to be spoken to in such a tone, but he saw the anger boiling in Treguard's eyes and wisely made no further remark.

'We've lost the bottle imp, too,' realized Erica.

Treguard stood, shielded his eyes from the sun, and scanned the beach. 'No sign; you're right,' he said after a moment. 'If the stopper had come out during the wreck then Pickle would be with us by now. If he's still stuck in the bottle, he'll drift here eventually.'

They covered Ghazi's grave with rocks and marked it with the legend from the hull of the *Incunabula*, which they found on a scrap of flotsam washed ashore a little way along the beach. By this time Treguard judged it to be about midday. Since there was still no sign of Pickle, they turned their attention to the cliffs. A natural staircase was worn into the rock, and with the help of the long vines that hung down they were able to scale this up to the perimeter of the jungle. From here to the zenith of the island, nothing could be seen except a swaying expanse of fervid greenery. Flowers glimmered like jewels amid the trees - extravagant blooms that trickled odd perfumes into the hot damp air.

'I don't know what I'd expected,' said Treguard as he surveyed the jungle. 'Just rocks and sand, perhaps. But never anything like this.'

'It's because of the Grail!' cried Erica with all the enthusiasm of an apostle perceiving some sacred truth. 'Don't you see? This proves it's still here. Its magic is the very stuff of life; remaining on the island

all these years, it must have brought about this lush fecundity.' Excited, she plunged on into the jungle.

Lancelot watched her go, a small figure determinedly striding into the green gloom. 'Women, eh?' he said to Treguard before following. 'Never let you have a moment's peace . . .'

The tree canopy gave shade from the burning sun, but no refuge from the heat. They had hardly gone a dozen paces before they were drenched in sweat. From all around came the hiss of water trickling through the dense foliage. Insects hung in dense swarms, the continual drone of their buzzing adding to the eerie jungle sounds. The ground was a squelchy mire, but moss-coated stones seemed to form the remnants of an ancient path. The undergrowth grew so thickly that Treguard and Lancelot had to draw their swords to chop it away.

'You should name your new sword,' grunted Lancelot as he held a creeper taut to hack at it.

'Aye.' A shaft of sunlight penetrated the treetops and danced along the blade; the blaze of liquid fire was dazzling in the green gloom. Treguard thought for a moment. 'I shall call it Morpheus, after the Shaper of Dreams in antique myth.'

A thicket of myrrh barred Erica's path. She pushed it aside, idly stripping some of the fresh green leaves in her hand, and pointed to the stepping-stones that lay underfoot. 'See the path?' she said. 'What does it tell us?'

The way to the wizard's lair, presumably,' said Lancelot.

Treguard nodded. 'Also, since the stones are heavily overgrown, it seems the path is not often

used. To hazard a guess, I'd say that Melapharos is probably long dead.'

'All the same, we mustn't allow ourselves to get overconfident,' said Erica, frowning prettily. 'Warding-spells would likely be cancelled by the wizard's demise, but there could be other snares. Those demons - jinn - that Ghazi told us about, for instance.'

'Let's not stray off the path,' Treguard said. It was an order rather than a suggestion. He did not know if the same rules of faerie that he had learned in Nightmare applied in this far southern clime, but they needed every edge they could get. They pressed on into the interior, at times having to feel for the stepping-stones when the only sunlight came in flickering cascades between the chinks of swaying foliage. In verdurous gloom, they wended their way along the winding mossy path. The further they went, the more bizarre and riotous the vegetation that grew around them. Heady incense swum in the still air, exuded by flowers of such vivid hue that they resembled the fragments of a stained-glass window scattered across the forest floor. Iridescent birds peered down at them between the branches, and once a heavy shape could be heard slouching through the bushes near the path. Lancelot swung his sword to scare it, but they got only a glimpse of round lambent eyes in the dimness and then the animal was gone.

At last the trees began to thin out. Emerging on to a bare stone ridge, Lancelot called back eagerly to the other two. They struggled up to where he stood, Treguard lifting Erica over the last thickets.

'Behold,' announced Lancelot: 'the tower of the Grail!'

Sunlight shimmered around the ruined palace. Its windows were clogged with tendrils of ivy, and masonry blocks had fallen from the once-proud tower. The cupola was broken like an old egg, barren and gaping open to the elements, but its cracked shell still shone with a thousand refracted colours from the jewels with which Melapharos had encrusted it.

The path would take them along the ridge and around to the ruin's portal by an indirect route. Lancelot chose instead to slide down the gentle rock slope and make his way up to the doorway through a thicket of tamarisk bushes. A scatter of dislodged rock-dust followed him down.

'I said to keep to the path,' Treguard yelled after him.

Lancelot turned and looked back up to the ridge. He dismissed Treguard's admonition with a wry grin. 'I like to take a direct approach. You can go the long way round if you want, though.'

'He's hot for the kill, so to speak,' murmured Erica, watching Lancelot with concern as he strode boldly towards the ruin. 'Come, Lord Treguard, let us make haste. If he gets there much before we do, he may not have the patience to wait.'

'It seems that patience was not a virtue much cultivated at Arthur's court,' replied Treguard, shaking his head in disapproval of the headstrong young knight's unruliness. But then, he too had once been young and obstinate, before his difficult life of adventure taught him the value of experience. It suddenly occurred to Treguard how strange it was to think of Lancelot as a younger man, since he had been born at least seven hundred years before his

own day. And as he thought this, something began to nag at the corner of his mind. He tried to puzzle out what it was ... a fact that did not quite fit ...

'Well, my lord, will you escort me to yon citadel?' said Erica.

Treguard beamed and took her arm, his daydream broken. 'Of course, milady; I am forgetting my manners as an English gentleman.'

They made their way along the path. At the entrance to the ruined citadel, they found Lancelot just clambering up the slope. His direct route had proven no quicker, passing as it did through patches of undergrowth and thorns. His powerful torso was bleeding from dozens of slight scratches by now, but he seemed not to notice. Grinning with exhilaration, he hauled himself up on to the path beside them and faced the grim portal ahead.

'That was unwise,' Erica chastened him in her soft voice. 'You know that wayfarers who venture off a demarcated path are courting the attention of hostile sorcery.'

'What sorcery?' snapped Lancelot and then, in a more respectful tone, he added: 'Melapharos obviously died long ago, milady - otherwise such a powerful sorcerer would never have let his fortress fall into such disrepair.'

Treguard was inspecting the telamones that stood on either side of the open portal. These columns of lime green stone took the form of human figures with the head and paws of lions. Reaching his sword out at arm's length, he tapped one.

'Waiting for them to come to life?' said Lancelot.

'I've seen it happen. But these seem no more than ordinary statues.'

Tut out their eyes,' proposed Erica. 'Living statues cannot animate once treated in that way.'

Treguard glanced over and caught her gaze. 'I hadn't realized you were so knowledgeable in matters of magic, Erica,' he said.

She smiled back. 'I am well-read.'

They dealt with the atlantean columns as she suggested - though Lancelot protested it was an unnecessary waste of time - before turning their attention to the doorway. From where they stood on the portico, bathed in bright sunlight, the inside of the building was a glowering block of darkness. Treguard took a pace forward and let his eyes adjust to the gloom. Insects scuttled across the cracked tiles of the floor, and wherever a breach in the walls admitted the least splinter of sunlight there grew patches of pallid vegetation.

He glanced to his left, searching for a route to the tower. The outlines of a low arch were visible in the gloom.

'We don't know where the Grail would be,' said Erica, coming up beside him. 'Did Melapharos bring it back here? We don't even know the outcome of the battle he fought with Prince Rashad.'

'Of course we do,' stated Treguard. 'They must have slain each other.'

She tilted her head, giving him that secret smile. 'How can you be so sure? The sage himself told us there were no witnesses.'

'True, but he knew the nature of myth. The only way such a story could have ended is with perfidy receiving its come-uppance, and a heroic life ending in self-sacrifice.'

'You're very sure of their relative roles, then,' she

replied; 'that the sorcerer was evil and the heathen prince good.'

'Who cares?' grumbled Lancelot. The point is, where's the Grail now?'

'In the tower,' said Treguard, trusting to his sixth sense. He set off towards the arch. As he did, the sword he had christened Morpheus began to shine with a soft grey glow, dispelling the murky darkness. Up in the dank crannies of the chamber, a few sheltering bats squeaked in annoyance at the sudden intrusion of light.

Treguard raised his eyebrows. 'An unexpected but thoroughly welcome accessory,' he remarked, holding the sword up. 'What other powers do you have, I wonder, Morpheus?'

Erica and Lancelot followed him, moving quickly to stay in the pool of light shed by the magic blade. On the other side of the arch was a long corridor. The smell in the air was of stone dust and mould. As they advanced along the corridor, the dim light threw a succession of ghastly friezes into vivid relief. Some showed capering demons inflicting torment on their victims. Others merely showed acts of stark depravity.

'You can tell a lot about a man by his furnishings,' observed Treguard. 'Do you still have any doubt that Melapharos was the villain of the piece, my lady?'

Erica was studying the friezes more in curiosity than disgust. 'They are not in the best of taste, admittedly,' she conceded. 'Quite possibly they had some bearing on his sorcery. The events depicted, for example, may be intended to foreshadow the curses that would devolve on anyone trespassing here.'

Lancelot curled his lip, deriding such sorcery, but

still he could not quite keep a quaver out of his voice as he said, 'You're sure all those curses and things would have been broken by his death?'

'Hexes and warding spells usually are,' she said. 'Not all enchantments, though; some work for a prespecified period. A thousand years and a day was a favoured span in ancient times, I believe.'

They reached the end of the corridor. From here, a long flight of stairs spiralled up into the heights of the tower. Dull rosy light burned up there, where the fractured light of the afternoon sun shone into the broken shell of the crystal cupola. Testing his weight carefully on each step, Treguard started to ascend. Their footfalls scraped on the clammy stone, echoing to sinister effect in the stifling air of the shaft.

Lancelot felt something fall on him like a shower of dust particles, and brushed at his bare skin. 'Lice!' he said, disgusted. 'There must be more of those damned bats roosting up there.'

Treguard stared up, keeping his gaze fixed at the top of the stairwell as they climbed. 'Strange they haven't heard us and flown off, then,' he mused. 'Bats are usually quite timid creatures . . .'

Suddenly he saw something detach itself from above and start to fall towards them. At first he took it for a trick of the light and then, because it dropped so slowly, for a large accumulation of cobwebs and dust. Only when he saw it unfurl its wings did he recognize it for what it truly was . . .

'A demon! Get back against the wall!'

The thing rushed down out of the shadows, leathery wings beating the air in slow measured sweeps. It was like a man in having four limbs, but

much larger and more spindly in its proportions. The body was covered in irregular patches of louse-infested hair, like a mouldering fur rug. Eyes of smouldering amber were deep set in ridges of bone above its bestial snout and wide needle-fanged mouth. Around it, and wafted down in choking gusts by its wings, hung the acrid smell of burnt sulphur.

As Treguard tensed himself for its attack he saw long strands of human hair wound tight around its neck, embedded in the tough dry skin, and he recalled the story the sage had told. This was the same demon, then - the one that even the hero Rashad could neither sunder with his sword nor choke to death with his beard. It had outlived its unholy master, Melapharos, but still lurked here in his tower, guarding the secrets and treasures in accordance with its last command. Now they had to do what Rashad, seven centuries before, had failed to: find a way to kill it.

A fist of sharp black knives sliced through the air towards his throat. Treguard put up his sword to meet it. There was a sound - *chuk* - like steel striking hard wood. The impact made Treguard sway, but he kept his balance and riposted at once, his blow slicing into the creature's flank and drawing a few drops of viscid yellow blood.

The thing dropped past them in a rush of brimstone and darkness. It clawed at the air with its powerful wings, slowing its descent until it was hovering in the middle of the stairwell a few feet below. Then it uttered a chilling screech and began to swoop up for another pass.

Lancelot pushed Erica behind him and held his sword in a strong two-handed grip. The demon and

he made their attacks simultaneously. Its talons opened a bloody gash in Lancelot's arm, but the knight got the better in their exchange of blows by slicing a deep rent in one of its wings. The demon, gave vent to a scream that showered Lancelot with sparks and hot ash from the pit of its unhuman bowels as it desperately tried to gain height.

So far they had been lucky, but the demon was far from finished and it would take just one solid blow from those cruel claws to kill them. They needed a plan. Seeing that their adversary was hurt, Treguard ran up the stairs to get above it on the opposite side of the shaft from Lancelot.

'Let's trap it between us!' he shouted. 'It can't climb as fast now you've crippled its wing.'

Lancelot nodded. The demon also noticed what Treguard was attempting. It had no intention of letting itself get caught in the tower shaft with one enemy above it and one below. In frenzied strokes of its wings, it fluttered upwards using its claws to gain purchases and assist its lame wing. Treguard lashed out as it climbed past him and saw another thick rill of blood seep on to the dry skin. Crouching in the down-draught of its wings, they watched it half clamber and half fly back up to the chamber at the top of the tower.

'Gone to lick its wounds!' cried Lancelot, nostrils flared and eyes bright with his battle frenzy. He raced up the stairs past Treguard. 'Come on - let's carry the fight to its roost!'

They ran up and emerged into the turret chamber. The low amber bands of late afternoon light slanted in between the broken panels of the dome, spilling into splinters of rainbow colour where they caught

the jewels. It took Treguard and his companions a few seconds to spot the demon. A trail of sticky yellow blood led across the black marble floor and disappeared behind a series of five ornamental panels that enclosed the centre of the room like a rood-screen. A shuffling movement, just discernible through the carved slats of the pentaptych panels, showed where the demon was hiding. Lancelot raised his sword and darted around to close with it, screaming in berserk fury.

The demon straightened to its full height as it saw him. Its wings brushed the roof of the dome and dislodged a shower of dust. Feigning serious injury in order to lure him close, it suddenly lashed out and caught him across the chest. Skin and muscle were laid open to the bone, but Lancelot only answered with a grunt of pain as he thrust his sword deep into the demon's stomach. Brimstone and sharp screams filled the air as a concoction of vile juices spurted from the wound.

Treguard lost no time in entering the fray. He ran the other way around the pentaptych so as to fall on the demon from behind. His sword cleaved into its wings, slicing bloody ribbons in the leathery skin. Beset on both sides, the demon gave a roar of anguish and lashed out, trying to seize both warriors in its claws. It caught Lancelot, but he twisted to avoid the main brunt of the blow so that it only succeeded in snagging the tattered remnants of his robes. Again his blade darted in like a serpent, biting hard on unhuman flesh.

Flailing in panic and fury now, the demon struck one of the pentaptych panels. The ancient wood shattered, carrying the other panels down with it as it

toppled. At that moment, Lancelot and Treguard struck together, both sinking their swords to the hilt in the demon's body. Writhing in agony, it reeled to one side and fell amid the debris of the broken screens. Panting heavily, they watched it give a last twitch and then lie still.

Dazzling light flared through the dome. Erica gasped and pointed: 'Look!'

The two warriors turned. The golden light bathed their faces while they stood wide-eyed in awe. As the realization sank in, they bent their knees to bow in reverence. Revealed now in the centre of the chamber, in the area formerly screened off by the pentaptych, was a podium of the same black marble as the floor. At its base were slumped two ancient skeletons, fleshless fingers still twined about each other's throats - the mortal remains of Melapharos and his foe Prince Rashad, locked together in hatred even after death.

And on the podium stood a chalice of burnished gold whose rim bore seven rubies shining like drops of warm blood—

The Holy Grail.

Treguard gazed on the Grail with a look of wonder, drinking deep on the taste of success and content to savour it a while. But Erica, who stood as Lancelot did with eyes averted from the light, called out to him: 'Take it.'

He stepped forward and lifted the Grail in his hand. The light from it burned less fiercely now, but he felt a warmth run through his veins and knew that the relic's holy power had not dimmed in the many centuries it had rested here.

The very symbol of Chivalry!' he said, holding it

aloft. 'Soon it shall be restored to its rightful place in fair England!'

So absorbed were the three by their discovery that they failed to notice the demon's carcass stirring on the floor behind them. The ebon claws flexed; smoky fire glimmered in the sunken eyes. It spread its wings with just a soft dry rustling, sending a waft of sulphur across the room.

Lancelot felt the draught on his neck and started to turn. 'Look out—!' he had time to cry.

The demon was crouching half erect behind them, blood flecking its jaws. Then it launched itself forward, catching them up in its lank arms as it came, and the momentum of its headlong rush carried all four right through the wall of the dome. Jewelled tiles burst apart and fell. Bearing its frail human foes, the demon spiralled out over the treetops and sent a screech of blood-chilling ferocity towards the sinking sun.

It intended to drop them all to their deaths, but the wounds it had received during the fight were taking their toll. Though able to withstand blows that would slay any natural creature, the demon's endurance was not limitless. A mist of darkness clouded its feral eyes, and the great leathery wings lost their strength. Treguard, struggling with all his strength in its grip, twisted around and pushed the sacred relic against its flesh. There was a dreadful searing hiss and a pungent fiery smell. The demon, conjured up by evil sorcery, could not abide the touch of something so holy when wielded by a pure knight. Finally breathing its last, it plummeted down towards the jungle.

They crashed through the branches, foliage whipping them. Treguard had time to take in the sight of

a bright-plumed bird, squawking in panic as it flew off through a beam of sunlight. In a cascade of twigs and broken leaves, they fell to the forest floor. Treguard felt a jarring impact as he slammed into the crook of a branch, then every thing went black . . .

Treguard stirred and fingered a bump on his head. His limbs were bruised, and his ankle badly twisted, but no bones seemed to be broken. He looked around. He had fallen in a clearing where a crystal-bright stream cut a swath through the jungle. It was still light, though from the angle of the wine-tinged rays Treguard judged that night would soon be falling. The demon's broken body hung draped in the branches above, arms outstretched in a unholy reflection of Christ on the cross. Treguard's jumbled thoughts came suddenly together. He felt a shock of panic as he remembered the Grail - surely he had not lost it now in the fall, after all their efforts? But no, when he reached out he found it lying just beside him on the ground.

His companions . . . He winced as he tried to rise on his sprained ankle. Limping across the clearing, he caught sight of Lancelot lying behind a bush next to the stream. His head was lolling back under the water and his eyes stared coldly at Treguard. Distorted by the rippling waters, it was as if Lancelot was peering up from another world, but Treguard knew that was just a weird fancy; in fact he could see nothing now.

He was dead.

Ironically, it was not the drop which had killed him - not directly. Somehow he had fallen on to the point of his own sword. The impact had driven it

right through his heart. Treguard shook his head sadly. He and Lancelot had had their differences, but they had fought side by side as comrades and it was a sorry end he had come to at the moment of their victory.

But what of Erica? There was no sign of her nearby. He cupped his hands and bellowed her name over and over, but the words sank into the stifling jungle with no answer. Praying that she still lived, Treguard found a broken branch to serve him as a walking stick and made his way towards the trees to search. Before he had taken half a dozen halting steps, however, two men emerged from the undergrowth to confront him.

'Rupert of Armitage!'

'Dunshelm!' hissed Rupert. 'I might have guessed you'd be mixed up in all this.'

Rupert stood with a small ginger-haired man who was looking around nervously. Both wore the tattered rags of Templar vestments, their lips dry and brine-blishered, their skins tanned raw. Obviously they had been shipwrecked and washed ashore like Treguard and his companions. Rupert looked weary and frightened, but seeing his old foe gave him a surge of hatred with which to fire his spirit. He had managed to salvage his sword from the wreck, Treguard noted.

Treguard lifted the Grail. The setting sun glanced off the blood-red rubies and the gold. 'Is this what you've coveted, Rupert? A lot of good men have died in the quest for it.'

'The Grail . . . ' Rupert studied it with narrowed eyes. 'I was right, then! By God's grace I vow to return with it to the Templar Headquarters in Acre.'

Treguard shook his head slowly. 'To become the focus of political leverage for your Order, as so many other relics have done? No, Rupert - better it goes back to England.'

Rupert drew his sword in a swift motion. 'I don't think you're in any condition to fight me, Dunshelm. You wanted the Grail enough to commit murder - now you'll die with it in your hands.'

Treguard stared slack-jawed at Rupert as he edged closer. He was too taken aback even to raise his own weapon. '*Murder?*' he repeated.

'Aye, you Saxon cur - have you so quickly forgotten Emeritus, the deacon of St Ely?' Rupert's lip curled in his distinctive sneer. 'We were coming to investigate the report of a disturbance when we surprised you red-handed that night. I did not know it was you, of course - the illusions you somehow conjured to trick us saw to that - but we knew from the documents stolen that you were after the Grail. What you didn't know is that we had another copy of the book in the preceptory. And Tancred here has helped to track you hereto this deserted island where you will finally meet your long-overdue demise.'

'Rupert, you're a fool,' said Treguard. 'Why would I kill Emeritus? He was a friend of mine.'

Rupert shrugged. 'Everyone's had to kill a friend now and again. But before I send your soul to Hell, Saxon, tell me this: how did you work your foul magic that sent the sandstorm against us, and later cast our ship down to the ocean depths? Five good men were lost, thanks to you.'

Even though Rupert was now almost close enough to lunge, Treguard was still indifferent to the danger. He stood with furrowed brows, his mind racing as he

tried to fit everything together. 'My dreams were right, then . . .' He looked up. 'You know I'm no sorcerer, Rupert.'

'No,' rang out a voice. 'But I am.'

Erica stood there, on the other side of the clearing. Somehow she had changed. She looked older - not old, but a woman in her fiery prime rather than the tender girl she had seemed. By her stance, by the look in her eye and the expression she wore, she had taken on an aura of cold command. She was still as captivating as before - only now she was terrible, as well. Like a goddess who had at last put on her unearthly aspect.

She smiled at the Templars - not a look with any mercy in it - and spoke on: 'You two survived the Undine's attack. Even you would have died, if the Saxon here had not disrupted my spell with his sleepwalking.' She turned a flat glare on Tancred. 'A Christian wizard! A thing as rare as roosters' eggs. How did you save yourself from the wreck, little man?'

Tancred blinked as he looked at her, then held up a talisman. It was in the stylized shape of a fish. 'By the Ichthys were we empowered to escape,' he replied, mildness softening his voice to almost inaudible pitch, 'and with the benevolence of St Christopher, the waves brought us to this isle alive.'

She bared her teeth and lifted something in her clenched fists. 'That is a matter I shall rectify forthwith,' she said.

Tancred brandished the crucifix around his neck. 'I know who you are, witch. Your faerie enchantments will avail you nothing against the symbol of the true faith.'

'Oh, but I have saved a special surprise for you.' She opened her right hand to reveal a locket Treguard had seen before. 'Gold and frankincense - regality and divinity.' She opened her left hand; some fresh green leaves were clutched there. 'And myrrh, which stands for sorrow and downfall. Your downfall, priest—'

She cast the leaves in front of her and muttered something under her breath in an eerie, lilting tongue. Suddenly there was a tension in the air like the oppressive weight before a storm. A breeze blew up, scattering droplets from the brook and sending the leaves skittering across the clearing. The three men were astonished to see footprints appear in the sand in front of Erica, as though an invisible champion stood there. The footprints raced towards Tancred before he had time to utter a counterspell. As they reached him, he was lifted off his feet. Rupert and Treguard grimaced in horror as they beheld the poor wizard literally torn limb from limb in front of their eyes. His screams lasted thankfully but a second.

The wind died down. The bloody remains of Tancred fell from the air, and of the phantom footprints there was now no sign.

Treguard took half a step towards Erica. *"Who are you?"* he said through gritted teeth.

She laughed. How often he had been heartened by her joyous laughter during their arduous journey south, only to find it such a chilling sound now. 'You Saxon fool! I am Morgana le Fay, an enchantress of long ago. King Arthur was my half-brother, and he made himself my foe. The tale I told you was rewoven from strands of truth, for it was Merlin who

placed me and my retainers in a sleep like death, and buried us in a barrow for seven centuries. Until a Cornish girl called Erica and her swain stumbled across me in my bower some months ago. I stole their lives so that I could live again.'

Treguard tilted his head towards the corpse in the stream. 'And this wasn't Lancelot, was it?'

'No - my son, Uwain. Thanks to my arts, one might almost have taken us for siblings, wouldn't you say? That was why we tore the pages from Emeritus' book after murdering him, earlier on the night that we first came to see you. The book had a description of the real Lancelot.'

'He's dead, you heartless witch.' Treguard kept his gaze firmly on her.

Erica - Morgana - allowed herself an instant of mourning. 'He knew he would die for me, my loyal lad. He wielded Balin's sword, you recall, which is fated to slay any unchivalrous knight who uses it. And in matters of chivalry he took after me. That was why we needed you, Saxon. My prophecy had warned me that only a knight pure in heart could find the Grail.'

'You vile witch!' gasped Rupert, finding his voice at last after the shock of watching Tancred die. Unconsciously, he had moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Treguard.

'Do you entertain thoughts of attacking me?' she said. 'Forget them. I could despatch you even quicker than I did the wizard. But first you'll do me a last service, by wrapping the Grail in strips of your clothing so that I can carry it without distress.'

A sparkling sprite skipped out of the jungle and tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hello, Erica,' said Pickle. 'What've I missed?'

Treguard exploded into action at once. In the instant Morgana was distracted, he bent and scooped water from the stream into the Grail. Straightening, he swept it up and flung the contents across the clearing into her face. Having been sanctified by contact with the relic, the holy water drew a tortured scream from her as it cancelled her sorcery. Even as she reeled away, trying desperately to wipe it from her eyes, Treguard leapt forward. But his twisted ankle gave way, sending him sprawling in the sand.

'You will die in torment for this!' Morgana was screeching. Pickle had jumped back away from her in alarm once he began to see what was going on. Now she was recovering from the shock, regathering her energies, getting ready to hurl a spell of dark destruction. A tracery of occult flames came spouting up from her hands . . .

To Treguard's astonishment as much as Morgana's, Rupert suddenly raced across the clearing. Seizing the enchantress, he drove his sword right into her heart. Even as he did, she released the magical black fire with which she had meant to destroy Treguard. It caught Rupert full in the chest. Both gave a short cry and fell together.

Treguard limped over and pulled Rupert to a sitting position. He could see at a glance that Morgana was dead, her body ageing rapidly before his eyes until nothing more was left of it than crumbling brown bones and an antique locket.

Rupert gave a groan and half opened his eyes. The magical fire had burned him terribly, and it was certain that he was not long for this world.

'You took the spell she meant for me,' said Treguard.

'Not by choice . . .' croaked Rupert. He tried to force a wry laugh, but it came out as no more than a choked cough. 'If I'd only been a fraction faster . . . I'm dying, Saxon.'

Treguard nodded.

The arrogance that usually sustained Rupert abruptly deserted him, peeling away his veneer of composure. He grabbed Treguard's arm and stared at him imploringly. 'I'm going to die unconfessed! My sins are so many. In God's name, don't let me be buried here on this unholy isle . . .'

'I won't,' vowed Treguard. There were still a few drops of spring water in the Grail. 'Drink from this, Rupert,' he said, 'and go to meet your Maker in a state of grace.'

He raised the chalice to Rupert's lips. It was only then that he saw he was already dead.

Treguard got to his feet, his hands cupped around the Grail. Many had died for it - good men and bad, and not just in the course of his own quest but down through the centuries. If he returned it openly to any nation or faction, no matter how noble in purpose, men would continue to plot and scheme to possess it. Such a sacred relic should not be sullied by being the object of sinful greed. He resolved to place it in the deepest chamber of Knightmare Castle, where it would be safe until the hour of England's greatest need, when King Arthur would arise from sleep and once more ride forth with his knights.

'I'm sorry I was delayed, master,' said Pickle, breaking in on these thoughts, 'but it wasn't until my bottle was smashed on the rocks as it washed ashore that I could get free. Did I miss much?'

'Indeed you did, Pickle. A brace of unexpected developments.'

Pickle looked around at the jungle. 'And will we, master, live here from now on . . . ?'

'Of course not!' bellowed Treguard. 'Set about your work, you lazy sprite; fetch timber, and coconut twine, and resin for caulking. We must build a vessel - and a sturdy one, at that. For we have come far, and it is a long way home.'

THE END

THE KNIGHTMARE CHALLENGE

The fire has burned low while Treguard was telling his tale. Now he goes over to the hearth and hurls on fresh logs, and the shadowy outlines of the Great Hall are thrown into fiery clarity once more.

'It is time,' he says. 'You must prove yourself.'

You nod, knowing this moment would arrive. Rising from the chair, you accept the Helm of Justice that he hands to you. As you are about to step through the massive doorway that leads to the dungeon, he places his hand on your shoulder. 'Wait. This time the challenges you will face are more arduous than ever before. The object of your quest, you see, is no less than the Holy Grail itself. You may wish to gird yourself in armour.' He gestures to the array of shields, pauldrons, greaves and vambraces lining the walls. 'Take what you will. Such armour could save your life. But bear in mind that its weight will also slow you down.'

Arm yourself with a pencil and paper for recording any items or spells that you acquire on your adventure. You will also need a six-sided die. After reading the rules below, you will be ready to start.

THE RULES OF THE GRAIL QUEST

1. Your Life Force Status has three possible grades: GREEN, AMBER and RED. You begin the adventure on GREEN, since you are as yet unwounded. During the adventure it is possible for you to gain or lose Life Force grades. For instance, if you were on AMBER and were told to lose a grade, your Life Force Status would change to RED. Once you are on RED, any further loss of Life Force will kill you.

2. You also have two Attributes: ARMOUR and DEXTERITY. Your scores in these Attributes show, respectively, your level of protection and how nimble and dextrous you are. Your basic score in these is an ARMOUR of 1 (representing the Helm of Justice) and a DEXTERITY of 6. Treguard has, however, offered to let you take more armour if you think it will be useful. You can set your ARMOUR to any number you like between 1 and 6, but you must reduce your DEXTERITY by a corresponding amount. If you wanted an ARMOUR score of 2, for instance, your DEXTERITY would only be 5.

3. Keep a note of items as you come across them. You can carry up to five items at a time. If you find an item that you think might come in handy but you already have five other items, you will have to discard one.

4. There are some occasions when you may get the chance to purchase things. For this reason it is worth keeping any money you find. You can carry up to fifty gold coins in your money-pouch and this still counts as just one item.

5. It is possible that you might learn spells during your adventure. Each spell can be used only once. Keep a note of any spells you acquire.

6. You can eat an item of food at an entry marked with an asterisk (*). Each item of food you eat when wounded increases your Life Force by one grade.

7. Finally, you must keep track of your CHIVALRY score. Your CHIVALRY begins at 3. It may increase or decrease according to how you conduct yourself on your quest. Since only a chivalrous knight can hope to obtain the Holy Grail, Treguard advises you to be

on your best behaviour. 'Scoundrels never prosper in the long run,' he says. Note, too, that if your CHIVALRY drops below 0, you may as well give up the quest there and then, as such a dishonourable knight could never hope to possess the GRAIL.

NOW BEGIN!

You are ready to set out. As you steel yourself in front of the dungeon door, Treguard draws back the iron bolts. He does not notice his impish servant, Pickle, scurrying up to hand you a bar of chocolate. (Remember to note that you have this.)

'Now,' says Treguard, turning, 'is there anything else?'

You hastily conceal the chocolate bar and wave Pickle away. 'How will I find the Grail?' you ask.

'Your quest will take you through the dungeon and along magical ley-lines that connect many distant places. The Grail is at the end of all those paths - though on some of them you may meet your doom before the journey's end. Do not be misled, since the way is not obvious, and remain steadfast to the code of Chivalry.'

Nodding, you step through the doorway and pass along a gallery that leads to a pentagonal chamber. The door you have entered by is in one wall. There are four others, each marked with a different carved symbol. Which symbol do you think indicates the right door to take?

A Cup Turn to **15**

A Sword Turn to **27**

A Staff Turn to **56**

A Coin Turn to **8**

*2

You come to a stream where you kneel down to refresh your parched lips. Nearby is a fishing-rod and some bait. It looks as though a fisherman has left it here, intending to return later.

If you sit down for a spot of fishing, turn to **97**

If you take the rod and head off along the bank,
turn to **35**

If you leave the rod where it is, turn to **4**

***3**

You come to a gate and, passing through, find yourself walking in a garden between high hedges. After a while you reach a sparkling fountain. By now you realize you are in a maze, quite lost, and you sit down on the edge of the fountain to rest.

A movement catches your eye and you look down, expecting to see a fish. Instead, you are astonished to see a woman in a gown of white samite under the water. She smiles back at you, her golden tresses drifting eerily in the currents of the fountain. Then she speaks:

"Three conundrums I shall set, and you must tell me if they are true or false. If all three of your replies are correct, I shall grant you a gift of sorcery. For two correct answers, you will at least win freedom from the maze. For one, I may give you a clue. But get *all* your answers wrong, and you must remain here for ever. Will you hear my conundrums?"

If you agree to pit your wits, turn to **81**

If you decline, turn to **143**

***4**

You journey on until nightfall, but you have still found nowhere to rest. The clanging of a bell echoes from out of the darkness on the road ahead. It is getting closer. You pause and see a cloth-swathed figure in the moonlight. A finger of icy dread brushes your heart as you hear him intone: 'Unclean, unclean . . .'

If you cross the road to avoid the leper, turn to **61**
If you walk on boldly to meet him, turn to **74**

5

The woman raises a pale hand out of the water. Her touch is like ice on your wrist. She has bestowed a single use of the MAZE spell; make a note of this. As she lowers her hand, you look up to see that the high hedgerows that surrounded you have now vanished. You make your way towards a gate in the garden wall.

Turn to **112**

6

The lion growls deep in its throat as it sees you coming towards it. When you are only a few paces away it starts to thrash its tail angrily. But you make soothing noises, and eventually it falls quiet and lets you open the jaws of the trap. For a long moment it stares into your eyes . . . *Does it see a benefactor - or a free lunch?* you wonder nervously.

Suddenly it leaps up and vanishes into the undergrowth. You shrug and start to return to the path, then the steel trap catches your eye. You shouldn't really leave it here, and it might even come in handy later. Make a note if you decide to keep it, then turn to **19**

7

'Then I really wonder whether you ought to be strolling about the countryside in such a careless manner,' he replies. 'There are all sorts of dangers about . . . lurking here and there.'

Is he threatening you? You are not having any of

that. As you step forward to give him a suitable reprimand for his insolence, he pulls back his cowl. You don't think he can be a friar after all. Those stubby horns on his head are a dead giveaway.

If you attack him, turn to **58**

If you run off, turn to **71**

***8**

You enter a land beyond the door. Rolling countryside spreads before you. Looking back, there is no sign at all of the dungeon.

'You are on a ley path,' says Treguard's voice out of nowhere. 'Explore this countryside. It is a blend of fable and history, and the magical paths through it may lead you to the Grail. Do you remember me telling you about the time I met the King of Elfland . . . ?'

Assuring Treguard that you do indeed remember the advice he has given in the past - and not wishing to get trapped into listening to another of his unending accounts - you hurry on your way. Reaching a river, you follow it to a ford where there is a village.

Apparently today is market-day. Traders, farmers and pedlars are bringing livestock and wares along the winding country roads from far and wide.

If you want to look for lodging, turn to **156**

If you would prefer to visit the market, turn to **84**

If you pass through the village without stopping, turn to **2**

9

'Actually,' you say, stepping forward, 'a shield will cost you twelve gold pieces.'

They think about this for quite a long time. One of them starts snoring, but a kick in the ribs from one of his comrades soon revives him.

'Yer right!' they all say at once.

'We can easily afford three at that price, lads,' says the first man.

As they head off, the sleepy one embraces you. 'Wha' a pal you are,' he sobs drunkenly. 'Jus' think . . . jus' think, we might've sat there all day if you 'adn't come along. 'Ere's a little something . . . '

He gives you a purse containing twenty gold pieces. Note this down, bearing in mind that up to fifty gold pieces can be counted as one item.

Then turn to **57**

10

'But wait,' she urges, gliding up to you as you pass under the lich-gate. 'Have you nothing for me?'

If you give her twelve gold pieces, she seems content to let you go on your way - turn to **2**

If you give her nothing, turn to **23**

11

Your only hope is to try and outrun the vampire. Discarding any items you may be carrying (cross them off your list), you race pell-mell through the darkened forest.

Roll a die.

If you score your DEXTERITY or less, turn to **12**

If you roll more than your DEXTERITY, turn to **153**

12

The vampire is right behind you; its graveyard

breath chills the back of your neck. Summoning everything for a last desperate burst of speed, you pull ahead of it just as it clutches for your shoulder. Its talons rake your flesh - lose one Life Force grade. If you survive that, you escape to **36**

***13**

Weary and aching in every joint, you get down from the tree and trudge on your way. A crisp wind blows out of the north, penetrating your cloak and threatening to sap your resolve as well as your body heat.

You are faintly cheered when, about noon, you arrive at the outskirts of the wood. But as you survey what lies ahead, you espy a new challenge.

Turn to **76**

***14**

At last the ley-paths bring you to a desolate winter landscape. The moor ahead is cloaked in thick snow, scarred by black outcroppings of rock. The wind wuthers across the world, thundering in your ears as you set your head down and trudge steadfastly on.

At long last, a henge of ancient standing stones becomes visible on the horizon. Squinting against the flurries of snow, you head towards it, sensing that your quest is almost at an end. And as you approach, you see there is a golden chalice on the altar stone in the middle of the henge. At last - the Holy Grail!

However, before you can reach the Grail, a host of women in white robes emerges from out of the snowstorm - or perhaps from nowhere, as you did not notice them before. They stand between the great

columns of the henge and each in turn removes her veil to look at you.

They are the Ladies of Avalon, who have guarded Arthur's sleeping form since his final battle. Now they are here to judge your worthiness to possess the Grail.

Roll a die.

If you score less than or equal to your CHIVALRY, turn to **159**

If you roll higher than your CHIVALRY, turn to **130**

15

You pass through the door. A moment later, Treguard's voice booms out of nowhere and thunders along the walls of the stone tunnel in which you find yourself: 'Perhaps you thought the symbol of the cup referred to the Grail? I told you that things in the dungeon are not that obvious, adventurer. No matter, the way you have chosen is as good as any - and just as dangerous. Proceed.'

After a short distance, you pass a door in the left-hand wall of the tunnel.

If you enter, turn to **145**

If you continue on your way past it, turn to **3**

16

A clang of metal rings out like a hammer on an anvil as Medraut's lance strikes your shield. At the same time a jarring shock runs up your arm as your own lance hits home. Both of you sway in your saddles, dazed by the impact, but are not unhorsed. Passing amid a flurry of hoofs, you wheel around at the far

end of the field and return for another exchange of blows.

Roll the die again.

If the number rolled is equal to or less than your

ARMOUR score, turn to **41**

If greater, turn to **28**

17

Hoi Polloi tells you he'd like you to judge the annual 'Ugliness Contest' between his mistresses. As he speaks, the three ladies in question step up on to the podium and he introduces each of them in turn. Lilith is agelessly youthful, and somewhat attractive in a sinister way. Mildread can best be described as homely - if your home is a vile and dingy hovel, that is. The third of them is the obvious winner: a twisted, leering hag with bulbous eyes and a nose like a gnawed carrot. Her name is Alison Gross.

So, who gets your award?

If you pick Lilith, turn to **29**

If you plump for Mildread, turn to **42**

If you choose Alison Gross, turn to **55**

If you say you cannot decide, turn to **68**

***18**

Two times out of three were you correct. For this, as I promised, the reward is freedom,' says the lady under the water. She gestures fluidly, and you look up to see that the encircling hedgerows have vanished. Suddenly a spattering of fountain droplets disturbs the water, and when you look again the woman has gone. Since there is a gate set in the garden wall now visible nearby, you head towards it.

Turn to **112**

***19**

You continue on your way. The day wears on, and eventually it starts to get dark. You have yet to see any sign of human habitation, let alone a clue that might lead you to the Holy Grail.

You settle down for the night under the spreading boughs of a grand old oak. It must have stood here for hundreds of years, like a majestic sentinel of the moors. As the evening turns cold, you spot an axe resting against the tree trunk.

If you chop the tree down to make a fire, turn to **31**

If you just settle down to sleep, turn to **44**

20

'And do you have an axe, such as one might use to fell a tree?'

If you say you do, turn to **32**

If you don't have an axe, turn to **7**

21

'Hello!' he says, beaming expansively and putting his hand on your shoulder. 'A traveller from afar, if I'm not mistaken. Not seen you in church, have I? Ah, such days we live in! Wicked times, indeed - more people come here on market-day than on Sunday. I must say just this . . .'

As he drones on, the traders are starting to pack up for the day. If you aren't to miss your chance to look around the market, you'll have to get rid of him somehow.

If you tell him you are on a quest for the Grail, turn to **22**

If you tell him you've spotted someone you know and want to go and talk to them, turn to **47**

If you politely let him finish what he's saying, turn to **34**

22

He blinks at you like a startled owl as you interrupt his continuous stream of chatter. 'Oh well,' he says, folding his hands across his broad belly, 'in that case I mustn't hold you up. Go with God.'

Turn to **57**

23

You push her aside. 'Begone, you fay,' you say to her. 'I am on an urgent and holy quest, and can brook no delay.'

She returns your curt words with a smile that flickers wanly in the encroaching dusk. 'Then beware that ill fortune does not follow too closely at your heels, "noble knight".'

She sweeps her hand in a cryptic gesture behind you and, glancing back, you thought to glimpse a black dog following you - but only for an instant. When you have blinked and looked again, it is nowhere to be seen amid the long shadows of sunset.

You have been cursed by an elf, and bad luck will hound you from now on. Add 1 to any die roll that you have to make during the rest of the adventure; for example, you would count a roll of 3 as 4, and so on.

Sullenly, you turn away from her and head towards the open countryside.

Turn to **2**

24

'People of Danu!' you shout into the depths of the wood. 'Aid me now, as I once aided one of your kin.'

There is a sound like the sighing of the wind, and then you are suddenly aware of figures standing near you, just off the path. They are warriors in electrum mail, each wielding a slender sword that gleams luteously in the moonlight.

'Pass on in safety, mortal,' says one of them, his teeth flashing in an elfin smile. *'We shall wait here to accost the ghoul if it tries to follow you.'*

Nodding your head in thanks, you hasten onwards.

Turn to **36**

*25

Recalling Cedric's mention of the Abbey of St Severin, you resolve to try and find it. You are not sure you could survive a night sleeping rough in Freneville Forest.

Before very long you come to a creeper-clad wall, built high to keep out the creatures of the wood. Following the wall soon brings you to the Abbey gates. You are cheered by the sight of lamplight from the chapel, and the sound of plainsong dispels the night's terrors.

The guest-master opens the gate and greets you.

If you ask to see the Abbot himself, turn to **50**

If you are content to spend the night in the guest-house and leave in the morning, turn to **63**

26

The Abbot receives you cordially, but obviously has little time to spare as he is preparing to go in to

matins. 'I advise you to head north,' he says once you have explained your quest, 'but there is a knight there who guards the bridge over the river, and he is apt to quarrel with you if he thinks you are a warrior like himself.'

'Is there any other way to cross the river?' you ask.

He strokes his chin. 'Some say that a ferryman plies his trade far to the west. It would be better if you did not let him take you all the way, though.'

Thanking him for his hospitality, you set out and by midday you are glad to be leaving the outskirts of the forest.

Turn to **76**

27

You step through the door and are amazed to find yourself in a pleasant sunlit meadow. Beyond lies a castle whose gleaming walls and turrets are protected by a glittering moat. You look behind you, but there is no sign of any door.

'No, there is no turning back, young adventurer,' says Treguard's voice out of empty air, 'For now, will you not enjoy the tournament?'

Tournament? You glance back towards the castle. Now the scene is peopled by knights on horseback, proudly riding to and fro in front of the tents and ribbon-festooned stands where spectators have gathered to watch them joust. An elderly man in minever-trimmed robes approaches you and introduces himself as the local lord's seneschal. 'Do you wish to take part in the tourney yourself?' he asks.

If you say that you would like that, turn to **40**

If you decline, turn to **53**

28

You are dashed right out of your saddle by the force of Medraut's lance-thrust. Lose one Life Force grade. Landing on your back on the grass, you lie winded for a few moments and then painfully sit up.

Medraut rides close and dismounts, drawing his sword from where it hangs by his saddle. As a squire rushes on to the field to hand you a sword, Medraut waits impatiently to continue the battle. No sooner have you armed yourself than he leaps forward and delivers a mighty blow which you barely manage to parry.

Roll a die.

If you score equal to or less than your DEXTERITY, turn to **54**

If you roll higher than your DEXTERITY, turn to **106**

29

Lilith smiles at you. But it is the smile on the face of the tiger. 'Why, you little rodent,' she says in a tone dripping with honeyed venom. 'If you think I'm ugly, try looking at yourself the next time you pass a mirror . . .'

You squeak a frightened reply, twitch your whiskers, and scurry off with your tail between your legs. There is no future in adventuring for a rat - and an ugly rat, at that - so you had better return to Treguard and get him to change you back before starting again.

***30**

The lady shakes her head. 'Only one of your replies was correct. For this dismal score, all I can offer is a

clue which may help you along the sinister path you must tread.'

You wait, but she seems to have nothing more to say. You reach down and touch the water, and at once ripples disturb the surface so that she is no longer visible. A moment later the ripples are gone, and now there is no trace of the mysterious lady either.

With a resigned shrug, you set out through the maze. Soon you come to a fork in the path, with both routes passing under a shaded arbour overgrown with roses.

If you decide to go left from here, turn to **69**

If you opt for the right-hand path, turn to **82**

***31**

The chopping is arduous work, but it keeps you warm until you have felled the majestic old oak. You think of how often Treguard has spoken of the virtue of simple hard work, and feel quite content in spirit as you build yourself a fire.

Exhausted and warm, you soon drift happily off to sleep. The next morning the axe has gone - presumably the woodsman who left it there came back and got it. Strange that he did not wake you, though, if only to ask who you were. Travellers must be a rare sight in these parts, after all ...

Putting such idle speculation out of your head, you set off on your way.

Turn to **157**

32

He nods, smiling. 'And do you, perchance, have a purse with twenty gold coins, more or less?'

If again you say yes, turn to **45**

If you do not, turn to **7**

33

They are obviously fairly tipsy. 'Let's see . . .' one of them is saying, his emphatic tone somewhat marred by drunken slurring. 'A shield can be got for two cows 'n' eight sacks of grain. Also, a cow sells for six sacks of grain 'n' a gold piece. We know tha' the going rate for grain is one sack for half a gold piece. So tha' means that a shield costs . . . lessee, it'd be ten gold pieces.'

'No it wouldn', ' says another. 'I reckon i's twenty-four gold pieces.'

The third belches loudly. 'Yer both wrong. 'S not possible to work it out from jus' the facts we know, see.'

Who is right?

If you agree with the first man, turn to **124**

If you agree with the second, turn to **137**

If you think the third, turn to **150**

If none of them is right, turn to **9**

If you don't want to venture an opinion, turn to **57**

34

It is almost sunset by the time he has finished telling you about the myriad sins and perils of the secular world. It is all you can do to keep from letting out a deep sigh of impatience. However, just after bidding you farewell and hurrying on his way to evening prayers, he turns and winks, saying, 'Blessed are the meek. Your gentle humility does you credit, adventurer.' And with that he speaks a benediction. Gain 1 CHIVALRY for your quiet perseverance.

As you go on your way there is just time, if you so wish, to purchase seven white geese from a farmer who is late in returning home. These will cost you five gold pieces in all. Cross off the money if you decide to buy the geese; they do not count against the limit of items you can carry because they will follow you around.

You leave the churchyard.

Turn to **85**

35

Lose 1 CHIVALRY. By your casual act of theft you have almost certainly ruined some poor peasant's livelihood! Obviously you still have a lot to learn about a knight's proper role in life - you are supposed to be the protector of the weak and innocent, not their despoiler.

Blithely disregarding of your villainy, you whistle a merry tune as you stroll off along the stream.

Turn to **4**

36

Your mind turns to thought of rest throughout the fast-falling night.

If you have a copper ring given to you by Cedric the monk, turn to **25**

If not, turn to **37**

***37**

The prospect of a night in the wild is hardly overjoyable - particularly not in this stygian place. Still, it seems you have no alternative. Finding a tree with a stout curving branch a little off the ground, you climb up and wedge yourself into the fork

between branch and trunk. Though uncomfortable, it will keep you safe from snakes and wolves. But you have a nasty suspicion that such commonplace dangers are the least of the perils of Freneville.

If you have a clay pot given to you by a leper and decide to make use of it, turn to **115**

If you don't have it, or prefer not to use it, turn to **128**

38

You are covered in striges. These abominable birds wait in the boles of dead trees by day, emerging at night to descend on sleeping travellers and drain their blood through long sharp beaks.

Regardless of any armour you might be wearing, the striges will have found chinks in it. Roll a die. On a score of 1-4 you lose one Life Force grade; a score of 5-6 means you lose two Life Force grades.

If you survive, you scream and frantically wave your arms to drive the striges away. They depart amid the dry rustling of feathers and with strange mewling cries. You spend the remaining hours until dawn not daring to sleep. If you were to look at yourself in a mirror, you would find that your hair has gone white.

Turn to **13**

39

"That's a funny place to keep your money," he cackles as you fish a coin out of your purse.

You get into the boat. "Where would you expect me to keep it, you old dotard?"

"Well," he says as he pushes out from the bank and

starts to punt across, 'folk used to pay for this ride with a coin kept under the tongue.'

If you continue over to the far bank, turn to **65**

If you tell him to turn back, turn to **78**

40

'Very good, very good,' he says. 'Now, d'you want to go in for the joust, or would you perhaps prefer the archery competition?'

If you decide to enter the joust, turn to **79**

If you opt to try your hand at the archery, turn to **66**

41

You unseat your opponent and he crashes to the grass. You would be within your rights to claim victory now, though you could dismount and continue the battle on foot if you like.

If you dismount and fight on, turn to **119**

If you claim victory, turn to **132**

42

Lose 1 CHIVALRY for being so ungallant as to pass judgement on a person's ugliness. Mildread is very pleased, however. 'What a dear! What a love!' she simpers, striking a grotesque pose. 'Here you go, dearie, take this Potion of Rust with you.' She hands you a leather bottle.

'That's bribery, you old bag!' shrieks Alison Gross. 'Disqualify her, Hoi Polloi.'

'It's only a bribe if you offer it *before* the event, ma'am,' points out the creepy servant. A squabble ensues, and you hurry away before things get even

nastier. Remember to make a note of the potion, then turn to **3**

43

'Not once were you right,' says the lady. 'We shall continue your education hereafter.' She reaches up and, seizing you in an unbreakable icy grip, pulls you inexorably down to join her under the water. It is the end of your adventure - and of you.

44

After walking for most of the day, you have no trouble getting off to sleep. However, you wake up shivering several times during the night, perhaps rueing your decision not to build a fire. By morning you have lost one Life Force grade. Rubbing the circulation back into your chilled limbs, you are about to set out again on your journey when you notice the axe. It must have been there some time, because the ivy has begun to grow around it. Since it may be useful, you sling it across your shoulders (make a note of this item) and then go on your way.

Turn to **157**

45

'I like a person who respects the countryside,' he says. 'In essence they are one: that chalice you call the Grail, and the flourishing embrace of Nature.'

'What do you know of the Grail?' you ask, stopping in your tracks in surprise at his words.

'Not much at all; it was long after my time!' he laughs, clapping you heartily on the shoulder. 'I'm not the one to come to for advice, anyway. That's not my style. But I have been known to give a gift now

and then, to those mortals I take a liking to.' He presses a set of reed pipes into your hand.

'But I don't know how to play,' you protest. You glance at the pipes. When you look up, the man has gone.

A voice like the wind in the trees whispers out of empty air: 'Anyone can make music with the Pipes of Pan . . .'. The voice recedes and then there is silence.

Note that you have the Pipes of Pan, then turn to **2**

46

She has draped a gaudy cloth over one of the gravestones to make a bench for her paraphernalia. As you step up, she tosses back her mane of tawny hair and favours you with a warm smile. Her sparkling eyes, full lips and rich olive skin tell you at once that she is one of those people who almost glow with vigour. Surely, then, she will be a suitable guide to the whereabouts of the Grail . . . ?

'Want your fortune told, stranger? Cross my palm with gold.'

'Thought it was meant to be silver,' you reply, sitting down opposite her on the tombstone.

She shrugs and gives you a wink. 'Inflation. The economy's been in a mess ever since King John levied his poll tax.'

If you have a gold coin to give her, turn to **111**

If you decide against having your fortune told, or cannot afford it, turn to **57**

47

Lose 1 CHIVALRY for lying to a holy man - a very inauspicious thing to do in view of your quest. Relieved to have got away from him, you hardly have

time to reflect on your transgression. You must hurry if you are to achieve anything here before the market ends for the day.

Turn to **57**

***48**

You succeed in catching a magnificent trout which provides you with a hearty and very welcome meal. Restore up to *two* Life Force grades if wounded.

Almost as welcome is the sparkling diamond ring that you find in the trout's stomach! This must have been dropped in the stream - perhaps years ago - and swallowed by the fish you caught. You can use the ring as cash if you get the chance; it is worth thirty gold pieces, but you will not be able to get change if you spend it. Note 'gold ring, worth thirty gps' if you decide to keep it.

Replete, you decide to be on your way. You can leave the fishing rod (turn to **4**) or take it with you (turn to **35**)

49

You hastily set the trap in the middle of the path and cover it over with some dead leaves. Walking on, it is all you can do to keep yourself from looking back. But you steel your nerves and, a few moments later, you hear the snap of the trap shutting.

Instead of the cry of pain that an animal might make, your nocturnal pursuer gives vent to just a dry gasp of surprise. You know that the trap in itself cannot harm the fiend, but it will hold it through the night until the sunrise drives it back to its grave. With a prayer of thanks, you hurry on.

Turn to **36**

50

If you have only Cedric's copper ring, turn to **26**

If you also have a diamond ring, turn to **158**

51

'Hold!' he says, raising his hand when you are less than a dozen paces apart. 'I perceive you to be a knight. None may pass without first proving their right against me in battle.'

The dwarfish squire wanders past to collect his master's shield. 'I'd just go back home, if I were you,' he advises you under his breath.

If you accept the knight's challenge, turn to **77**

If you tell him you have no time for such foolery, turn to **90**

If you make use of an item, turn to **103**

52

You have often had reason to be grateful for your armour - but although it has saved your life in the past, its weight could easily drag you down to your doom in these gelid waters. Uncorking the potion bottle, you pour it over yourself. Instantly, all of your armour is dissolved away - except for the magical Helm of Justice, of course. Reduce your **ARMOUR** rating to 1 (and therefore increase your **DEXTERITY** to 6) and then turn to **91**

*53

'Thank you, but I am content just to watch the proceedings,' you tell him.

You spend an idle afternoon lounging on the spectator stand with a goblet of wine in your hand.

The jousts are vigorous and thrilling, punctuated by many deafening clangs of lance on shield. As many contestants are carried off unconscious after a heavy fall from horseback as are able to stagger off on their own feet.

The day ends with the lord who is hosting the tourney, Count Baudouin of Flanders, jousting against Sir Geoffrey d'Averais. Both are doughty fighters who have bested a succession of opponents to reach the final. Doubtless both are on their last reserves of energy by now.

You watch as they charge together. Geoffrey's lance wavers, but the Count's finds its mark. Geoffrey is hurled out of the saddle and rolls on the turf, quickly regaining his feet in spite of the stunning impact of his fall. He seems to expect his opponent to dismount and continue the battle with swords, but the Count puts up his lance, saying: 'That is enough, Geoffrey. You fought well, and I salute your courage, but the fall has weakened you and you could not hope to stand against me now.'

Some of the onlookers give a sharp intake of breath on hearing this. Sir Geoffrey stands silent for a moment, then lowers his sword and bows to the Count.

'Hmph!' snorts a florid-face man sitting behind you. 'In the old days a man was expected to fight on as long as his foe was still able.'

An elderly man beside you turns to address him: 'I disagree with you, sirrah. Once Geoffrey had fallen, the outcome was not in doubt. The Count obviously wished to spare him from an embarrassing defeat.'

They debate this for a while, and then you are asked to comment. What answer will you give?

'The Count should have fought on.' Turn to **67**

'The Count was right to call a halt.' Turn to **80**

'It is not for us to comment, as we are the Count's guests at this tourney.' Turn to **93**

54

After a long and gruelling battle you finally succeed in landing a solid buffet on the side of Medraut's helmet. Dazed, he sinks to his knees on the turf and calls for quarter. You are happy to accept his surrender - and also the golden Tore of Victory that marks you as the winner of the tourney. Note this down, along with a purse containing fifty gold pieces that Medraut gives you for his ransom.

Everyone is keen for you to attend a celebratory banquet at the castle, but you explain that your quest for the Grail takes precedence. Bidding them farewell, you set out into the wild land that lies beyond the tended fields of the lord's estates.

Turn to **2**

55

'Naturally,' snorts Alison. 'Alison Gross, that's me: the ugliest witch in the whole country.' She glares at you. 'Why are you smirking in that self-satisfied manner, you despicable little wretch? Oh yes, I can see right through you. Just like I can see through that ridiculous tin helm you're wearing. Now, you want to see something *really* ugly . . . ?'

She swipes out and clouts you with her broomstick. Roll a die, and lose one Life Force grade if you get more than your ARMOUR score. If you roll equal to or under your ARMOUR, you get off

unscathed. Either way, you run off and continue on your journey.

Turn to **3**

56

You pass beyond the door and walk along a narrow dank tunnel that smells of earth and tangled roots. Soon, without quite noticing how, you leave the dungeon altogether and find yourself strolling through a pleasant pastoral landscape of flower-filled meadows and light woods. The gentle breeze brings a warm heathery scent.

You are passing some thorn bushes when you hear a sound, like the rumbling growl of a wild beast.

If you sneak closer to investigate, turn to **134**

If you hurry past without stopping, turn to **147**

57

If you are ready to continue on your way, you can either leave the market the way you came in (turn to **85**) or you could duck under the hedge at the back of the churchyard (turn to **98**).

Alternatively, if you have not already done so, you could talk to one of the following:

The priest Turn to **21**

The fortune-teller Turn to **46**

The minstrel Turn to **59**

The men-at-arms Turn to **33**

Or you might like to buy something from one of the traders, in which case turn to **72**

58

'I wouldn't try it,' he says, smiling mockingly as you raise your fists. Til knock you flat as a pancake.'

'Oh yeah?' you reply, lashing out. 'What makes you so sure?'

He blocks your attack and unleashes a counter-punch with the force of a coiled spring. 'I ought to know,' he says as his fist slams into your stomach. 'I am the god *Pan*, after all.'

You double up, too winded to speak even if you could think of anything to say. Pan proceeds to administer a very efficient beating to punish you for your temerity. Lose one Life Force grade. Later, you recover consciousness to discover he has gone.

Nursing numerous bruises and lacerations, you hobble on your way. The gain of 1 CHIVALRY should palliate your wounded pride, anyway - no one can say you lack a certain reckless courage, since you did refuse to back down even from a god!

Turn to **2**

59

You stop and listen to the man's song for a few minutes. It is a long ballad that tells a tale of palaces and kings, of dire demons, of nighted woods and stolen goods, of wands and magic rings.

As he stops to refresh himself from a pitcher of water, the minstrel nods to where his hat lies on the grass.

If you drop a gold piece into the hat, turn to **60**

If not, turn to **73**

60

Remember to delete the gold coin from your total cash. Then roll a die.

If you score equal to or less than your DEXTERITY, turn to **86**

If you roll more than your DEXTERITY, turn to **99**

61

You are timid and lacking in plain charity; lose 1 CHIVALRY.

The leper stumps past, moaning piteously to himself, and is swallowed up by the night. Shivering, you pull your cloak about you and hurry on, discomforted by this ill-starred encounter. It does not seem to bode well for your success - but that is really your own fault. Evil befalls those who think evil of others.

Turn to **87**

62

'Let's hope this isn't just whistling in the dark,' you say to yourself as you put the pipes to your lips.

Your faith is rewarded. The lilting melody sends a shudder through the whole forest. The boughs of trees whip to and fro, leaves swirl in a mad dance, and the wind itself howls in answer to your tune. Affrighted by the numinous power that it senses close at hand, the vampire withdraws to its tomb. You are free to continue on your way.

Turn to **36**

***63**

After a satisfying, if not exactly hearty, breakfast you feel ready to take on whatever perils fate has in store. Gain one Life Force grade *if* you were injured. Slipping quietly away during matins, you make your way along the woodland path.

To your relief, you reach the edge of the forest

shortly after midday. But now it seems there is a new challenge for you to contend with . . .

Turn to **76**

64

The knight loses all interest in you. Returning to his pavilion with a snort of disgust, he leaves the way clear for you to cross.

If you want to use the bridge, turn to **14**

If you decide to go along the bank in search of somewhere else to cross, turn to **102**

65

The landscape to which you are conveyed does not look like any earthly realm. It is a place of dank mists, looming boulders and gaunt grey-faced figures who wander forlornly to and fro.

'Where is this?' you ask the ferryman indignantly. 'I seek the Holy Grail!'

'You shall not find it here. I have brought you across the Styx, and this is the abode of the dead.'

Get used to your new home. You won't be leaving ...

66

Gain 1 CHIVALRY for your willingness to participate. You are shown to the archery butts where, by dint of either luck or skill, you send shaft after shaft winging unerringly to its target. At last the other competitors shake their heads and walk off- all except for one young man in a green jerkin, who has proven himself a match for you so far. He shoots an arrow into the very centre of the target at maximum range: a marvellous feat that draws a gasp of admiration from the onlookers. Now it is your turn . . .

If you aim to put your arrow right beside his, turn to **92**

If you try to show him up by actually splitting his shaft with yours, turn to **105**

67

Lose 1 CHIVALRY, as it is quite ungentlemanly for a knight to criticize his host.

However, the florid-faced man seems to agree with you. 'Too right,' he says as the others discreetly disperse. 'I don't agree with this nonsense about rank having its privileges. What's the point on a joust if it isn't a true contest of skill? These nobles can be real softies.'

Several people nearby are glaring at him. Anxious to change the subject, you ask why he didn't take part himself.

'Not allowed to shed blood,' he grumbles; 'except for that of heathens, of course. I'm a monk, you see. The name's Cedric.'

As you shake hands, you tell him of your quest for the Holy Grail. He ponders for a moment and then takes a copper ring off his finger and gives it to you. 'I shouldn't be surprised if your travels take you through the Forest of Freneville. It's a gruesome place to spend the night in. If you need a place to stay, show this ring to the Abbot of St Severin.'

Note that you have Cedric's ring. Bidding him farewell, you continue on your way. Behind you, you hear Cedric start shouting and cursing at a couple of knights who have had the temerity to disagree with aim about something. You quicken your pace.

Turn to **2**

68

Gain 1 CHIVALRY, as you are quite correct - it would *be* ungallant to comment on a lady's lack of comeliness. The three weird sisters and their creepy henchman do not seem to appreciate your knightly discretion, however. They start shouting and calling you names like 'rat' and 'toad'. You decide to leave before the curses get too literal.

Turn to **3**

***69**

Your choice of path soon brings you to the edge of the maze. Nearby is the garden wall. It is too high to climb, but you follow it for only a short distance before coming to a gate which opens with a squeal of rusted hinges.

Turn to **112**

***70**

Despite the bird's frantic efforts to distract you, you soon find her nest. It contains three eggs. As you take them, the mother flies at your face - but she cannot peck at your eyes, protected as they are by the sheer metal visor of the Helm of Justice. What irony. Batting her aside, you build a small fire out of twigs and bracken and soon enjoy a breakfast of poached eggs. Add one Life Force grade if you are wounded. Then set off again.

Turn to **96**

71

Lose 1 CHIVALRY for your undignified flight. This is *not* how a brave knight is supposed to behave. All the same, it is probably better to lose face than to lose your life. At last, when you are absolutely sure that

you have lost him, you stop running - but even then you waste no time in getting on with your quest. With quick strides (and the occasional nervous backward glance) you head along the country road.

Turn to **2**

72

Among the various goods you have to choose from, these catch your attention:

A wedge of cheese, costing 1 gold piece

A meat pie, costing 2 gold pieces

A honeycomb, costing 1 gold piece

A sword, costing 25 gold pieces

A bottle of vinegar, costing 2 gold pieces

A bow, costing 12 gold pieces

A steel strap, costing 5 gold pieces

Seven white geese, costing 5 gold pieces in all

Note that the geese would not count against the limit of items you can carry, as they will follow you around. Once you have made your purchases and crossed off the money, it is time to be on your way.

Turn to **85**

73

Intrigued by the ballad, you listen for longer than you had intended to. It is with a start of surprise that you realize the sun is getting low in the sky. Many of the traders are already packing up their wares and preparing to go home. You hurry to make any purchases you might need. The goods available are:

A wedge of cheese, costing 1 gold piece

A honeycomb, costing 1 gold piece

A sword, costing 25 gold pieces

A bow, costing 12 gold pieces

Seven white geese, costing 5 gold pieces in all

Note that the geese would not count against the limit of items you can carry, as they will follow you around. Once you have decided what if anything to buy and deleted the money from your cash, you can leave either by the lich-gate (turn to **85**) or under the hedge at the back of the churchyard (turn to **98**).

74

The leper shuffles to a halt and extends a swollen, stubby hand wrapped in winding-cloth. 'An' you love God, good stranger, will you give alms to a poor beggar? Heaven rewards all charity.'

If you give him an item of food, turn to **152**

If you give him money, decide how much, delete the amount from your cash, and turn to **100**

If you have nothing to give him, you must pass by: turn to **87**

75

You summon up every last shred of courage and turn to face the vampire that is pursuing you. It comes swiftly forward out of the darkness, its leering white face borne over a body of black shadow. Its eyes are like the candlelight in a Hallowe'en mask. Despite its speed it moves in almost total silence, as though blown on the wind rather than walking. This, more than anything else, unnerves you and makes your arm shake as you take aim.

Roll a die.

If you get equal to or less than your DEXTERITY, turn to **127**

If you roll more than your DEXTERITY, turn to **140**

*76

A river in full torrent blocks your progress. There is a single bridge across it, but by the side of this a knight has erected his pavilion. Two warhorses are tethered outside it, and the knight's coat-of-arms (a silver key on a blue field) is defiantly displayed for all to see.

You have heard of this custom of disputing the right to pass. The idea is that the knight will challenge other warriors to a friendly battle, and they must best him in order to use the bridge. The term 'friendly' is relative: knights lived in harsher times than you are used to in the modern world, and such a bout could end in serious injury. Even death.

If you approach the pavilion, turn to **89**

If you follow the riverbank in search of another place to cross, turn to **102**

77

The squire rushes forward to provide you with a sword if you do not have one. Then the mysterious knight lunges at you, and the two of you exchange a furious series of attacks and parries. Sparks fly as your blades clang together. Soon you are sweating despite the wintry chill in the air. In spite of his age, your foe has great speed and stamina.

Roll a die.

If you score equal to or less than your ARMOUR, you win; turn to **155**

If you roll more than your ARMOUR, he bests you and inflicts the loss of one Life Force grade; turn to **64** if you survive that.

78

'There is no turning back,' says Charon in a sepulchral voice. 'We are leaving the mortal vale behind. Ahead lies that place of no return, the ethonic realm where Hades rules.'

He is taking you between the Planes to the land of the dead! You waste no time in diving over the side. Although the water is deep and cold, and the strong current makes swimming dangerous, even a slim chance of survival is better than going quietly into oblivion.

If you have a Potion of Rust *and* your ARMOUR is 2 or more, turn to **52**

Otherwise turn to **91**

79

Your name is added to the list of combatants and the seneschal arranges for you to be lent a horse and lance. Gain 1 CHIVALRY for your willingness to take part in this traditional sport of the gentry.

You fight in several jousts, winning each in turn, and finally you are matched against Sir Medraut of the Orkneys, an imposing warrior whose escutcheon is silver with a thick diagonal black band. You have seen him toy with several opponents during the course of the afternoon; he promises to be a formidable foe.

Kicking at his horse's flanks, Medraut utters a great warcry: '*Debello!*' and thunders across the field towards you. Levelling your own lance and gripping it with all your strength, you ride forward resolutely to meet him.

Roll a die.

If you score equal to or less than your ARMOUR, turn to **16**

If the number rolled is greater than your ARMOUR, turn to **28**

80

Nobody seems terribly anxious to take issue with what you say - apart from the man sitting behind you. He leans forward and presses his angry face next to yours so that you can almost feel the sand-papery stubble on his chin. 'Who asked you, dogbreath?' he snarls.

Dogbreath? That is a definite case of the pot calling the kettle black, you think to yourself. But you have no intention of losing your dignity by arguing with this churl. You muster your self-control long enough to return his insults with a polite nod of the head, then turn away and set off on your quest again.

Turn to **2**

81

She smiles. 'Well then, tell me is this true or false? The first man to set foot in North America was a Viking.'

Consider carefully; the success of your quest might depend on it.

If you say it is true, turn to **94**

If you say it is false, turn to **107**

82

A cloud passes in front of the sun, causing a cold chill to run down your spine. Suddenly the serenity of the garden seems pregnant with menace. A moment later, your fears are confirmed as you hear the

If you go back to take a look, turn to **95**
If you hurry on through the maze, turn to **108**

*83

You have not gone half a dozen paces further when your gaze alights on something glittering beside the path. Stooping, you find it is a gold coin - and nearby is a purse containing nineteen more just like it. Some traveller who came this way before you must have dropped his savings. Ah well - he obviously never missed them, and his loss is your gain.

84

If you stop to converse with her, turn to **110**
If you go straight in to the market, turn to **123**

85

If you were given money by the green-cloaked woman at the churchyard gate, turn to **125**
Otherwise, you continue on your way: turn to **2**

86

'Shouldn't use a blunt knife, should you?' you snarl, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. As you raise a hue and cry, the villagers gather round to apprehend the young rascal and his master, the minstrel.

As the miscreants are led off to the manor house, where the lord's steward will mete out justice, a delegation of merchants led by a local freeman come forward. Thanking you for catching the pickpockets who have preyed off them for months, they hand you a reward of twenty gold pieces. Make a note of this, bearing in mind that you can count up to fifty gold coins as a single item.

Then, if you have not done so already, you can speak to:

The fat priest Turn to **21**

The gypsy fortune-teller Turn to **46**

The drunken men-at-arms Turn to **33**

Or one of the stall-holders Turn to **72**

If you leave without speaking to anyone else, you can go out the way you came (turn to **85**) or by scrambling under the hedge that runs along the back of the churchyard (turn to **98**).

87

The Forest of Freneville looms ahead, a thick tangle of utter blackness in the grey moonlight. It is with some trepidation that you step under the boughs and begin to make your way along a narrow woodland path.

You have heard eerie tales about this haunted wilderness - tales of wraiths and goblins to give the bravest adventurer gooseflesh. And so you are startled, but not surprised, when you hear the ominous snap of a twig on the trail behind you. Pausing to listen, you fancy you can hear the sound of gliding movement through the undergrowth, but it is very nearly drowned out by the pounding of your heart.

A fanged white face stares out of the branches, outlined for just an instant by a moonbeam. Its fierce yellow eyes burn into your soul. Then a rack of cloud obscures the moon, and you are left in utter darkness.

If you met Laurinda des Elfes earlier in your adventure, turn to **24**

If you try using an item, turn to **126**

If you have a spell that might save you, turn to **139**

If none of the above, turn to **11**

88

You must know little of arcane lore if you imagine you have a chance of despatching a vampire with an ordinary blade. It ignores your frantic blows as though you were striking at it with nothing more than a stalk of grass. Then, grasping you firmly to its white lips, it proceeds to gorge itself on your bright red lifeblood. You fall into black oblivion.

89

The knight emerges, attended by his squire, and watches like a hawk as you approach. He is not young, but his proud strong stance and implacable gaze tell you that age has not robbed him of his

vigour. An experienced warrior like him will be hard to beat.

If you have either the *Tore of Victory* *or* an **ARMOUR** rating of 3 or more, turn to **51**

Otherwise turn to **64**

90

'Stand aside, whoever you may be,' you reply. 'I am on a sacred quest. In any case, I have no wish to hurt an elderly gentleman who would be better off sitting contentedly by a fireside than contending people's right to use a bridge.'

'Save your concern for your own wellbeing, you insolent young upstart!' He slams his visor down and moves towards you with raised sword.

Turn to **77**

91

Roll a die.

If your score is equal to or less than your **DEXTERITY**, turn to **104**

If you roll higher than your **DEXTERITY**, turn to **117**

92

Roll a die.

If you get equal to or less than your **DEXTERITY**, turn to **118**

If you score over your **DEXTERITY**, turn to **131**

93

Gain 1 **CHIVALRY** for your adroitly-judged reply. Everyone nearby recognizes your decorum, and the subject is dropped. Since the joust is now at an end,

the crowd heads back to the castle for a banquet. You would dearly love to join in their revelry, but your quest for the Grail is more urgent. You set out towards the wild moors beyond the Count's estates.

Turn to **2**

94

'Wrong,' says the watery maiden. 'The first man to do so was a Red Indian. So what of this: the century will end at midnight on 31 December 1999 - true or false?'

If you say this is true, turn to **120**

If you say false, turn to **133**

95

A giant spider leaps on to your back and sinks envenomed mandibles into the top of your spine. You struggle feebly for a short time, then paralysis creeps into your limbs. Horribly, you are still conscious as the spider hauls you off to join the stock in its larder. The best you can hope for is that you might give it indigestion.

***96**

About midday, you come across a figure. This is the first person you have seen since leaving Nightmare Castle. As you catch up with him, you see that he wears a long robe and cowl - presumably a friar, then. He has a curious gait, half skipping and half hobbling. You wonder if he might be suffering from gout or a deformed foot, though he seems quite sprightly all the same.

If you stop to talk to him, turn to **109**

If you fall back a bit and follow him, turn to **122**

If you hurry past without saying anything, turn to **135**

***97**

Roll a die.

If the score is less than or equal to your DEXTERITY, turn to **48**

If you roll over your DEXTERITY, you spend an hour but don't succeed in catching so much as an old shoe. Finally you give up and continue on your way: turn to **4**

98

If you were given money by a lady in a green cape, lose 1 CHIVALRY for stealing her money and then sneaking off without keeping your promise to her.

Now you realize it is time to continue your quest. You trudge out of the village as the sun sinks amid the western hills. Perhaps you also ought to think about mending your ways; you will never attain your goal if you insist on acting like the basest villain!

Turn to **2**

99

After some time, you bore of the song and wander off into the crowd. Later you are dismayed to find that your purse has gone - along with all the money you had! (Cross this off.) You look for the minstrel, certain that he had something to do with the theft, but he has gone. Disgruntled, you leave the market.

If you leave by the lich-gate, turn to **85**

If you leave by the hedge at the back churchyard, turn to **98**

100

'May God and His favourite angel both bless you, kind adventurer,' he says. 'But harken to my word of warning. This road will take you into the heart of the Forest of Freneville, which is a dark place steeped in witchery. I advise you to turn back, as you value your soul.'

If you say that you cannot turn back because you are on a quest for the Holy Grail, turn to **113**

If you thank him and say you will bear in mind what he's told you, turn to **87**

101

As you recite the spell, a silvery gleam outlines the trail ahead of you. It is as though the moonlight itself had taken on liquid substance. Stepping forward, you find your strides devouring the distance. The surrounding trees rush by as you use the ley path to race to safety. The vampire is left standing baffled many leagues behind, its dead brain unable to comprehend the means by which its prey escaped.

Turn to **36**

102

After walking for almost an hour, you come upon a ferryman with a dilapidated old punt.

'Want to cross over, do you?' he croaks. 'It'll cost you a gold coin. Used to be only a silver, but I hear even Belisarius is setting his sights higher these days. Nothing stays the same, but nothing changes - that's my motto . . .'

Evidently he is senile, but he looks sturdy enough to get you over to the opposite bank.

If you pay him a gold piece, turn to **39**

If you go back to the bridge where the knight is waiting, turn to **89**

103

Which of these will you try:

An axe? Turn to **116**

Or a potion? Turn to **129**

If neither, you have the choice of accepting the challenge (turn to **77**) or refusing outright (turn to **90**)

104

Fighting against a strong undertow, you swim desperately for the far bank. Charon shouts something, but you cannot hear him over the torrent. In any case, there is no turning back now.

Finally you reach dry land. You stagger out of the river and manage a few paces before falling, exhausted and bedraggled, among the reeds. There you lie for several minutes, regathering your energy and savouring the sweet taste of life, before you are ready to go on.

Turn to **14**

105

Roll a die.

If you get equal to or less than your DEXTERITY, turn to **144**

If you score greater than your DEXTERITY, turn to **131**

106

You are finally bested after a gruelling sword-fight. Lose one Life Force grade. You are on the verge of

crying craven, but your opponent sees you starting to lower your sword and sheathes his own so as to spare you that indignity. Evidently he is a paragon of chivalry.

Medraut flips up his visor with one gauntleted hand and extends the other to pat you on the shoulder. 'Well fought,' he pants, wiping the sweat and grime out of his eyes. 'I can't remember the last time anyone gave me such a tough contest.'

Later, the events of the day at an end, you slip quietly away while Medraut is receiving the victor's award.

Turn to **2**

107

'Quite so.' She nods, her hair waving gently in the shimmering water. 'He was a Red Indian, of course. Now for the second question. The century will end at midnight on 31 December 1999. Is this true or false?'

If you answer true, turn to **133**

If you answer false, turn to **146**

108

The footfalls become closer and faster - a soft, multiple drumming which sounds as though you are pursued by a large creature with more than two legs. Probably about eight legs, in fact. As you hear it scuttling closer, you abandon any sense of dignity and run for your life. Lose 1 CHIVALRY for your unseemly panic.

Roll a die.

If you score equal to or less than your DEXTERITY, turn to **121**

If you score higher than your DEXTERITY, turn to **95**

109

The man looks up as you draw level with him. He has a broad face, handsome in a weather-beaten way, and eyes that twinkle like gold under the shade of his hood.

'Won't you tarry and chat awhile, traveller?' he says, laying a hand on your sleeve. His voice stirs images of sunlit glades, drowsy meadows, waterfalls and spring thunderstorms.

If you pull away from him and hurry on, turn to **135**

If you reply that you'd be happy to walk with him, turn to **148**

110

The green-cloaked figure turns as you approach. She is a mere wisp of a lass, with silvery grey eyes and curls of autumn brown in her hair. 'Tarry awhile,' she implores, touching your sleeve with her delicate pale hand. 'I have a favour to ask. I wish to buy seven white geese, but I must shun this gathering for a reason I'd rather not elaborate. Will you make the purchase for me? Here, I have the money.' She offers you a bag of coins.

If you agree, turn to **149**

If you ask why she can't go to market herself, turn to **136**

If you refuse to help, turn to **123**

111

Cross off the coin you've spent. She peers into her

crystal ball for a moment, then takes your hand and traces the palmistry lines there. The touch of her fingernail tickles slightly, but you suppress the urge to giggle. It would not, after all, be seemly in a proud knight.

'You seek the Grail,' she says abruptly.

Good so far; you're impressed. 'Will I find it?' you ask.

If you are worthy. Now listen - and remember I speak only of possibilities, not certainties. You may encounter a contentious knight at a bridge. He will challenge your right to pass if he sees evidence you are a warrior. Another way to cross the river that he guards is to seek out the ferryman, Charon, who charges a coin for passage in his boat - but don't let him take you all the way. Once across the river, you must find the Forest of Freneville. If anyone offers you aid before you get there, be sure to accept.'

She looks up, and her earlier vitality is now dulled by a curious lassitude. She lets her hair fall half over her eyes, too drained to push it back. 'That is all I can perceive. Go.'

Turn to **57**

112

On the other side of the gate you find a dense growth of thorns. Scrambling through them towards the sound of a bubbling stream, you feel them snag your clothing and scratch your flesh. Try to roll equal to or under your ARMOUR on a die; if unsuccessful, you lose one Life Force grade.

Assuming you survive, you struggle on until finally you are free of the thorns.

Turn to **2**

113

He shakes his head glumly. 'I too was once a young adventurer, full of hope,' he mutters. 'Still, you may succeed where I failed - you are purer in heart than ever I was. You should know that it is not cunning, nor even wisdom, that will win the Grail, but virtue. If you must travel through the forest, at least take this salve . . . '

- He presses a clay pot into your hands. 'What is it?' you ask.

'Magic stuff. It'll protect you from the striges,' he replies.

At this point an owl's shriek startles you, and by the time you collect your wits you see that the leper has hurried on without further explanation. Note that you have the clay pot if you decide to keep it, then turn to **87**

114

The spell causes the path to become tangled and overgrown behind you as you walk. The vampire tries to give chase, but a hawthorn bush springs up to block its path. You hear its voiceless snarl of frustrated rage as your magic confuses its progress. It will wander lost in the forest until despatched by the dawn.

Breathing a sigh of relief at your narrow escape, and content that the fiend will never menace another traveller in these parts, you hurry on through the trees.

Turn to **36**

*115

The moment you open the pot, it emits a rancid

stench that almost makes you throw up. Reeling in nausea, you steady yourself so as not to fall out of the tree.

If you really want to eat the contents of the pot, turn to **141**

If not, turn to **154**

116

Without warning, you hurl the axe at him. Roll a die, and try to get equal to or less than your DEXTERITY.

If successful, you hit him - turn to **142**

If not, then your aim is off- turn to **77**

117

They say that drowning is not a bad way to go, but in fact there are no pleasant ways to die. As you lose consciousness, your last thought is that you failed in your quest ...

118

Gain 1 CHIVALRY for resisting the urge to show your opponent up: humility is a good trait in a knight.

The arrow flies true, thudding home into the butt beside your competitor's.

'Outstanding!' he cries, shaking you warmly by the hand. 'It appears the contest is a draw. Never before have I encountered any whose archery skill was such a close match to my own. Here, will you not take this bow as my gift to you - and also a spell called FOREST PATHS that I know?'

Make a note of the bow and the spell. The seneschal also hands you a purse containing ten gold

pieces as your share of the prize money. As the assembled gentry head back to the castle, you take your leave of them and continue on your way.

Turn to **2**

119

Gain 1 CHIVALRY. As you step down from the saddle and reach for your sword, Medraut staggers to his feet and shakes his head. 'Enough,' he says, raising his visor and mustering a strained smile. 'That fall knocked the fight out of me. You've won.'

You are presented with a gold Tore of Victory and a purse containing fifty gold pieces. Note these down, then continue on your way by turning to **2**

120

She shakes her head - almost sadly, you think. 'Reflect for a moment,' she says. 'Since there was never a year 0 AD, the next century will in fact start with the year 2001. Now for my final question. I carefully weigh an egg-timer, and at the moment that the first sand is just starting to run through I find it weighs less than it does when the sands are not running. Is this true or false?'

If you say it is true, turn to **30**

If you say false, turn to **43**

121

A giant wolf-spider comes crashing through the maze, hot on your heels. You hardly dare to glance back, but its glistening venatic gaze raises the hairs on the nape of your neck all the same. Sobbing for breath, you suddenly catch sight of the garden wall - and set into it, not far ahead, a gate!

You dive for the gate, but the spider has caught up and bites at you even as you do. Lose one Life Force grade. If you survive, you are able to scramble through the gate and close it behind you.

Turn to **112**

122

Shortly afterwards, the friar (if such he is) passes over a brook that cuts across the path. When you reach the spot, you see that his feet sank into the damp earth beside the brook. He left footprints in the shape of a goat's hooves!

If you catch up to speak with him, turn to **109**

If you let him get well ahead, turn to **135**

123

Amid the throng of market-goers, a number of people catch your eye. There is a portly old man in the robes of the village priest, a gypsy fortune-teller, a minstrel strumming a lyre, and a group of surly men-at-arms quaffing ale surreptitiously behind a tombstone.

Will you:

Go over to the priest? Turn to **21**

Get your fortune told? Turn to **46**

Listen to the minstrel? Turn to **59**

Speak to the men-at-arms? Turn to **33**

Buy something from one of the many traders? Turn to **72**

Alternatively, you could now leave the market - either the way you entered (turn to **85**) or by scrambling under the hedge at the back (turn to **98**).

124

You tell them what you think. They look at you Wearily and stagger off towards a trader who has various weapons and bits of armour on his cart. You watch them engage in a heated argument for a while, but no satisfactory conclusion is reached. At last the trader calls over the village reeve to complain, and the men-at-arms are thrown out of the churchyard.

Turn to **57**

125

If you present her with seven geese plus seven gold coins, turn to **138**

If you present her with just the geese, turn to **151**

If neither, turn to **10**

126

Which of these might help you:

A steel trap? Turn to **49**

The Pipes of Pan? Turn to **62**

A bow? Turn to **75**

A sword? Turn to **88**

If you don't have any of the above, but you possess a spell, turn to **139**

If you have no spells either, turn to **11**

127

Fortune favours the brave, they say, and certainly luck is with you now. Your shaft finds the vile creature's heart, and it falls like a dead log across the path. When you steel yourself to go closer, anxious to make sure of its demise, you find only a mouldering skeleton clad in wisps of age-blackened shroud cloth.

You leave the arrow wedged in its ribcage and continue on your way.

Turn to **36**

128

You sink into a fitful sleep in which you are plagued by nightmarish visions. A procession of knights drift forward out of the morphetic mist, each with a face of yellowed bone under his visor of jagged rust. They are those who went before you and failed in the quest for the Grail.

In your dream they draw closer. You want to cry out, to fend them off - to run. But you are rooted to the spot. Leering horribly, they level their lances and stab at you. Strangely, though, each wound feels like only a pinprick . . .

Head swimming, you surface out of the dream like a drowning man. The faces of the nightmare knights are gone, replaced by a moonlit tangle of branches and foliage.

Then you hear a rustle of wings, and at that instant a chilling realization threatens to engulf you in panic. You can *still feel* the pinprick wounds . . . !

Turn to **38**

129

You have the stopper out of the potion bottle before he can react. Darting forward, you hurl its contents over him, and instantly all of his battle-harness is eaten away by corrosion. He stands there in just his underclothes, the sword in his hand no more than a crumbling bar of rust.

'Now, sir knight, you're in no condition to dispute my right to use the bridge,' you point out. Despite

your best efforts, you cannot keep a trace of smugness out of your voice.

'Sorcery!' he fumes. 'Go across then, you varlet. I regret I mistook you for an honest knight.'

Lose 1 CHIVALRY for your disgraceful action (you must have been expecting that) and then turn to **64**

130

You are judged and found wanting. Even as you reach for the Grail, with frost riming your lips and numbing your fingers, you suddenly find yourself back in the Great Hall of Nightmare Castle.

'That's it, put another log on the fire before you set out,' says Treguard.

'But, my lord,' you say, putting a hand to your head in bewilderment. 'I already set out . . . I found the Grail, but was refused it . . . !' You give him a dazed look. 'Didn't I . . . ?'

Treguard laughs. 'You were staring into the hearth - the hearth of Nightmare, remember. What you saw there was a vision of a possible future. It showed you the wrong path to take: a valuable clue, as now you can set out on your real quest armed with that forewarning. Try a different way. Perseverance will be rewarded by success.'

Turn back to the beginning and try again.

131

Your opponent has bested you, but there is no shame in losing as long as you competed with good grace. He bows, and as you walk away from the tourney field you are applauded by the watching crowd. It has been pleasant to while away a few hours at these

knightly games, but now you are keen to get on with your quest.

Turn to **2**

132

There is polite applause from the crowd, though you hardly get the impression of ecstatic approval. Regardless of their opinion, you have won the tourney fair and square. The seneschal presents you with a glittering Tore of Victory and a purse containing fifty gold pieces. Note these down.

An oversight means that you are not invited to attend the forthcoming banquet at the castle. You would not have the time to spare in any case: your quest for the Grail is weighing on your mind, and you now set out for the wild countryside that lies beyond the carefully-tended fields of the local lord's domain.

Turn to **2**

133

This time she regards you without comment, leaving the nagging worry that you might not be doing too well. A light breeze stirs the surface of the water as she poses her third question: 'Is this true or false? An egg-timer is placed on a set of scales, and just as the first sand is starting to run through, it weighs less than it does when the sands are not running.'

If you say this is true, turn to **18**

If you say false, turn to **30**

134

You see a lion with its paw caught in a vicious steel trap. Blood stains its tawny fur, and it gives an

occasional growl of anguish as it struggles in vain to pull free.

If you want to approach and free the lion, turn to **6**

If you decide it isn't worth the risk, turn to **19**

135

You are several paces ahead when the friar takes out a set of Pan-pipes and starts to play a frolicking, pastoral melody. Instantly your heart is full of the joys of spring-time. It is all you can do to keep from kicking your heels in a madcap dance.

If you let him catch up, turn to **148**

If you cover your ears and continue on without stopping, turn to **2**

136

Lose 1 CHIVALRY for pestering her rudely on a matter she has already told you she cannot talk about. You are not sure whether she is answering you or just daydreaming when she gazes past you towards the horizon and murmurs, 'The new ways are taking hold; soon my kind will be gone from the world . . .'

Suddenly it comes to you - of course! She is an elf, and cannot enter consecrated ground because of her faerie nature. You make the sign of the cross and hurry away, not wishing to incur a hex by association with her.

Turn to **123**

137

'Rubbish!' yells the first man. 'Whatcha got fer brains - turnips? No-one asked you, anyway. Go on, getout've're.'

He aims a clumsy but powerful punch at you.

What makes it more powerful is that he's holding a mace at the time. Try to roll your ARMOUR or less on a die; if you fail, lose one Life Force grade.

Either way, the fracas draws such attention that the other villagers pile in. You even see the portly priest, laying about the men while bellowing quotes from the Scriptures at the top of his lungs. By the time he has got to the bit about turning the other cheek (incidentally while banging a man-at-arms' head against a tree) you decide to make a sharp getaway so as not to get embroiled.

If you leave by the churchyard gate, turn to **85**

If you go under the hedge at the back, turn to **98**

138

Gain 1 CHIVALRY for your exemplary conduct.

Although she offers you the change you got after buying the geese, you refuse it on the basis of the knightly code. There is no reason why I should profit from a simple act of gallantry, milady,' you tell her.

Turn to **151**

139

What spell will you use?

FOREST PATHS Turn to **101**

MAZE Turn to **114**

If you have not learned either of these, you must either try an item (turn to **126**) or run for it (turn to **11**)

140

The arrow strikes a bloodless gash across its face - but to no avail. It rushes headlong towards you, its

hands taking you in an icy grip before you can turn to flee. Some sorcery (or is it only stark fear?) robs you of all strength. Fangs close around your throat, and with a last sob of despair you surrender to oblivion ...

141

That wasn't very sensible, since the leper did describe it as a *salve*. Moments after ingesting the stuff, you start to be violently sick. You go on heaving for several minutes. This is horrible, but probably saves your life - you vomit the noxious salve out of your system before it can do any lasting harm. Unfortunately you vomit up a fair proportion of your stomach lining at the same time. Lose one Life Force grade.

If still alive at the end of this, you sink back feebly against the crook of the branch and soon doze off.

Turn to **128**

142

The axe splits the chainmail protecting his arm and inflicts a deep gash. If you were expecting him to be outraged by your sudden attack, you are surprised. He actually gives a fierce grin of admiration and cries, 'A good opening gambit, youngster. You have spirit - but the battle is not over yet. Have at thee!'

The two of you cross swords, sending sparks flying in the chill air. Before long you are panting for breath, and heartily glad that you managed to get an early advantage. For a man well past the prime of youth, he is a formidable fighter indeed.

Roll a die and subtract one; for instance, if you roll 6 then count it as **5**.

If the final score is less than or equal to your ARMOUR, you win - turn to **155**

If you score higher than your ARMOUR (after subtracting one from the number rolled), he bests you - turn to **64**

***143**

'Then go,' she murmurs in liquid tones. 'See whether Fate will lead you hence.' She turns her head away, the audience at an end.

You head off through the maze. You are faced with a choice of routes, both passing through the rose-covered bowers between the hedges.

If you take the left-hand path, turn to **69**

If you go right, turn to **82**

144

The extremely difficult shot finds its mark, splintering your opponent's arrow. Everyone hails you the undisputed master of the competition, but there is something muted about the applause - as if they disapprove of the arrogant way you demonstrated your superiority. As your prize, you are presented with a bow and a purse containing twenty gold pieces; make a note of these. After bowing grandly to the crowd, you continue on your way.

Turn to **2**

145

Beyond the door is a torchlit chamber dominated by a curtained podium. An unctuous hunchbacked servant approaches and introduces himself as Hoi Polloi. Brushing his sparse white hair aside, he licks his thin lips and asks if you would do him a favour.

If you agree, he leads you over towards the podium; turn to **17**

Otherwise, you can leave and continue on your way; turn to **3**

146

'Indeed,' she nods; 'there was no such year as 0 AD, so the next century will in fact start with the year 2001. Now for the third and last question. I carefully weigh an egg-timer, and at the moment that the first sand is just starting to run it weighs less than it does when the sands are not running. True or false?'

If you think this is true, turn to **5**

If you believe it to be false, turn to **18**

147

Lose 1 CHIVALRY; the profession of knight is not for the faint-hearted. You continue on your way until it starts to get dark, but still you have found no clue to the whereabouts of the Grail. Nor any sign of human habitation.

Feeling tired after the hours you have spent walking, you shelter under the spreading boughs of an ancient oak. The night is clear, and under the starry sky a cold wind springs up. As the moon rises, its creamy light falls on an axe that you had not previously noticed resting against the tree trunk.

You could chop the oak down to make a fire (turn to **31**) or you could huddle up against the trunk as best you can and go to sleep (turn to **44**).

148

'Would you happen to have about your person a steel

trap, of the sort used to catch wild animals?' he asks suddenly.

If you answer that you do, turn to **20**

If you do not, turn to **7**

149

'My thanks,' she says. 'Here is all I have - twelve pieces of gold. Once you have bought the geese, feel free to spend any change on your own needs.'

You take the green velvet purse from her slender hand and then head past her into the churchyard. Note that you now have twelve gold coins (remembering that the purse counts as just one item) and then turn to **123**

150

They listen to you with a great effort of concentration.

'Told yer!' says the third man to his comrades, following this up with a great belch of contentment.

There is nothing more to be said. You leave them sitting disgruntled with their ale.

Turn to **57**

151

Thanking you for doing her this service, she tells you that her name is Laurinda. 'I have friends in the Forest of Freneville,' she says. 'If you should go astray there and find yourself in need of aid, call on the people of Danu. They will hear you.'

With that, she marshals her geese and walks away. She dwindles until lost in the gathering dusk. It is time that you, too, were on your way.

Turn to **2**

152

Remember to cross off the item you give him. Gain 1 CHIVALRY, as it is indeed noble to go short yourself in order to help another who is more needy.

The leper gratefully accepts the food and begins to gnaw on it as though it is his first meal in a week. It may well be, at that.

Turn to **100**

153

You had thought your armour might save your life one day. Now it spells your doom, slowing you up just enough for the vampire to catch you. You whimper in fear as you see its expressionless face sink out of the darkness, and sharp teeth pierce an artery in your throat. Your death is horrible - but less horrible than the ghastly undeath into which you will soon awaken.

154

Very sensible. The man who gave it to you did describe it as a *salve*, after all. You force yourself to rub the loathsome ointment into your skin, gagging in disgust all the while. It smells of the rotted remnants of greasy dead meat, and the tingling on your flesh is like a thousand tiny lice.

Wondering whether you were wise to trust the leper, you doze off into a fitful slumber.

Turn to **13**

***155**

'Well fought,' he acknowledges, panting with exertion as he lowers his sword.

You give a curt nod. 'And yourself. Now, though it would be pleasant to tarry and chat awhile, I must press on with my quest for the Grail.'

'At least take some provisions for your journey,' he says.

As his servant prepares a parcel of bread and venison, the knight, whose name is Sir Kay, tells you that he believes the shrine of the Grail is near at hand: ' . . . Not in a physical sense, but for one who follows the ley-paths it is close.'

The servant gives you the rations, which count as a single item but restore *two* Life Force grades when eaten. Thanking Sir Kay, you set out.

Turn to **14**

***156**

You find an old yokel on the village green.

In answer to your query, he tells you that the village has no inn as they are not accustomed to travellers. 'Them traders an' such as've come too far to return 'ome after market are like to get lodgin' in ol' Giles's barn.'

'Do you think I could ask this Giles for lodging, then?' you ask the old man.

He nods, but as you set off he calls after you: 'You could *ask*, awright. Won't get any luck, though. 'E'll be full up, it bein' market day an' all.'

Making an effort to be polite, you thank him for his help and try to decide on your next move.

If you want to head on out of the village right away, turn to **2**

If you think it might be worth taking a trip to the market first, turn to **84**

***157**

Whistling in the early morning sunshine, you follow a path along the rim of a green valley. Off to your left, in the long grass bordering the path, you see a bird fluttering to and fro. At first you think it must have a broken wing, then you realize it is just feigning injury to distract you. Its nest must be nearby. As this thought strikes you, you become aware of the pangs of hunger in your empty stomach. A breakfast of eggs would fill the gap.

If you search for the nest, turn to **70**

If you ignore your hunger, turn to **83**

158

You are shown in to the Abbot's quarters. He fixes you with a suspicious stare and asks how you came by the ring. You start to tell him that you found it inside a fish, but even as you speak you realize how preposterous the story sounds.

'It was the ring of the Lady of Tamburne, my sister,' says the Abbot. 'She went out riding three months ago, and her horse returned without her. Now I see that what I feared most has happened. She was murdered for her fine trinkets - like that ring you now wear, you blackhearted villain!'

Your protestations of innocence fall on deaf ears. He orders you seized by the lay brothers and locked in a cell while he sends a letter to the local magistrate. Since the magistrate turns out to be the Abbot's cousin, you can expect rough justice. Your adventure ends here and, possibly, your life . . .

159

You are close to fainting from weariness, hunger and

cold. Sheer determination sustains you as you take the last few steps to the altar slab. The Holy Grail gleams, its golden light giving you the strength you need. You reach for it with numb fingers, then suddenly feel an electric thrill run through your body as you touch it. A blaze of light fills your eyes . . .

You are back in the Great Hall of Nightmare Castle, warming your hands in front of the fire. You look round, startled. Treguard is sitting in his chair, smiling.

'M-my lord . . .' you say falteringly. 'Have I been dreaming? I thought I found the Grail.'

He gets up and gives you a hearty pat on the back. 'And so you did, young adventurer. For the Grail *is* a dream - a dream of Chivalry, of honour. A dream of justice for all. Go forth from these walls a champion of Chivalry, and carry that dream to all you meet.'

You beam with pride. You are a worthy knight indeed.